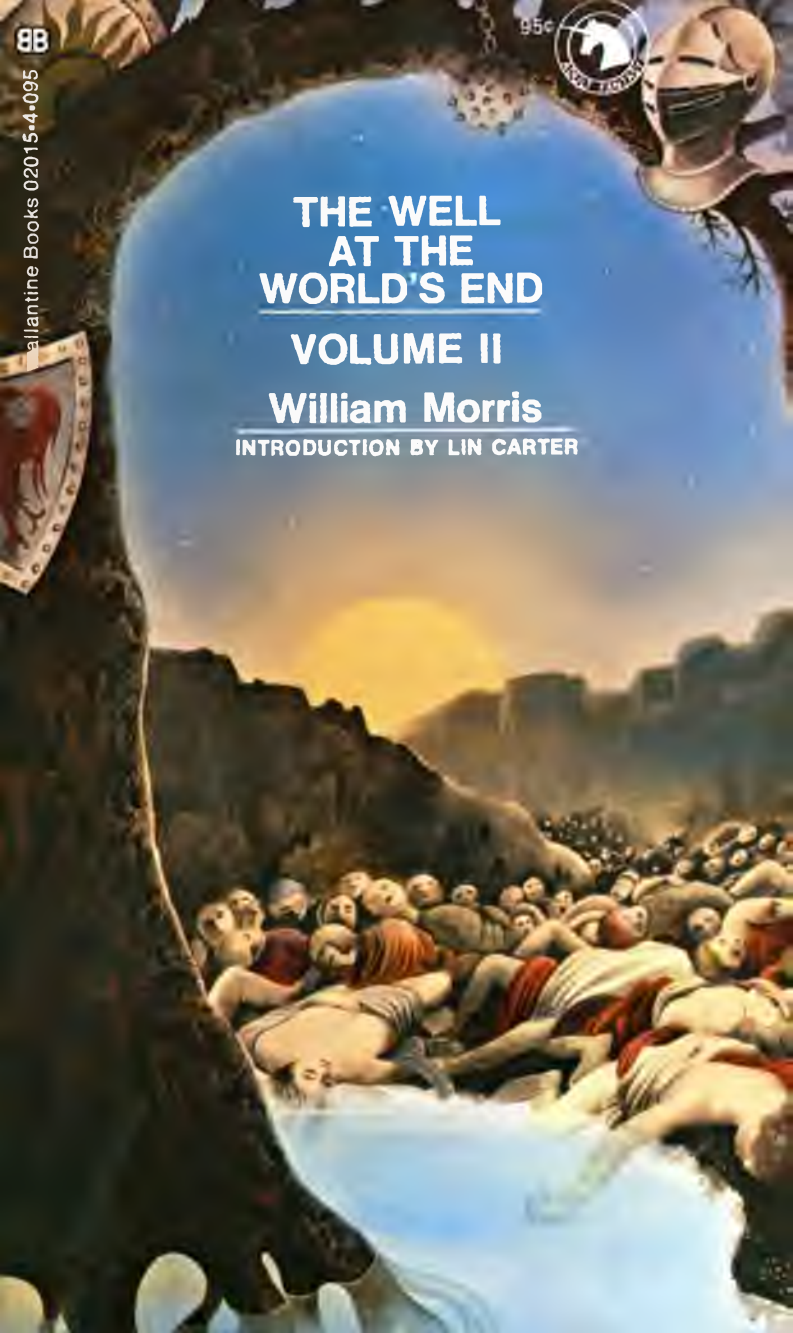
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THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END
VOLUME II
William Morris
INTRODUCTION BY LIN CARTER

William Morris was a staggeringly talented man. He was architect, sculptor, author, musician, artist and translator extraordinary; he designed fabrics, glass, and furniture, musical instruments and, undoubtedly, many a labor-saving device around the house. For he believed in the wholeness of life, he admired the simplicity of an earlier day and deplored the industrial revolution of which he saw only the beginning.

In his writing he attempted to hark back to a simpler, wiser time, to values that seemed to be disappearing from his own world.

THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END, his literary masterwork, is a commentary on life. The Well itself is a chimera, a test, indeed, the final deadly test for those few who find it. But it is the Journey that matters, the Road to the Well, the quest that encounters all the diversions of life itself and gets there despite the adventures, the threats, the dangers and the temptations. The Well is a grand tale, fully worthy of one of the nineteenth century's most creative artists.

Adult
Fantasy

Also by William Morris

THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END:
VOLUME I

THE WOOD BEYOND THE WORLD

THE WATER OF THE WONDROUS ISLES

Published by Ballantine Books

THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END

VOLUME II

a tale by

William Morris

INTRODUCTION BY LIN CARTER

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About THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END, *and William Morris*:

THE ROAD TO THE WELL

This is the second volume of an epic masterpiece of heroic fantasy, *The Well at the World's End* by the Victorian novelist, poet, translator, pioneer socialist, and artisan, William Morris.

In the first volume we saw the sons of King Peter of Little Upmeads ride forth to knightly adventures in the wide world. We followed the youngest, Prince Ralph, as he set out. First he consulted Clement and Dame Katherine of a nearby town as to the lands beyond Upmeads. Katherine gave him a charmed necklace of beads to keep him safe, and from these good people Ralph first heard the tale of the Well at the World's End and that he who drinks of that Well finds healing and peace, true love and long life. Riding thence he encounters a lovely damsel of the hostelry of Bourton Abbas, from whom he wins a kiss.

In the Wood Perilous which lies beyond, his adventures really begin. He comes upon a knight from the Burg of the Four Friths leading a bound captive maiden whom Ralph sets free, slaying her captor. This Lady of the Wildwood, (as he thinks of her), advises him to shun the folk of the Burg and seek haven in the town of Hampton whither she rides. The Burg is a nest of murderous robbers, says she, but the folk of Hampton–under–Scaur are friendly and peaceable.

For a second time he encounters Dorothea, the damsel of Bourton Abbas. Amidst the Wood Perilous he discovers her: she too is bound to seek peace at the Well at the World's End, but will not permit him to accompany her as his heart is not fully in the quest. She also tells him the Lady of the Wildwood lied, for the folk of Hampton are neither friendly nor peaceable, but are instead a band of rogues and reivers called the Fellowship of the Dry Tree. Nonetheless, she takes the

road to Hampton, for the sale relates that it lies on the way to the Well. Soon Ralph encounters a carle who confirms what Dorothea has told him, saying that the Burg is a goodly town and its lord no tyrant oppressor, while the folk of Hampton are good people but ruled by evil lords.

Pursued by knights of the Dry Tree, Ralph and the carle seek refuge in the Burg. From Burg-folk Ralph learns that they of the Dry Tree are ruled over by a queen who is part goddess and part witch. Ralph learns several things about the Burg-folk that turn his mind against them; secretly, by night, he and the carle flee the Burg, narrowly eluding capture through the aid of friends of the carle. Travelling through woodlands with this band, Ralph comes to mistrust them as rogues and runaways of the Dry Tree; he parts with them and takes refuge in a fair and splendid castle called the House of Abundance.

All of this fair and plenteous land, he learns from an old carline of the House, is under the wise and gracious rule of the Lady of Abundance who is young and fair and sweet as a maiden, for all that she came to this land ere old gaffers now alive were puling babes. Here, too, he hears again of the Well at the World's End.

Riding forth, Ralph espies two knights battling over a lady. She is that same Lady of the Wildwood whom he saved earlier. One knight, blazoned with a great gold sun, strikes down the other and claims the Lady. She calls on Ralph for aid, and he battles but is conquered by the Knight of the Sun who spares his life only at the behest of the Lady. Benighted in the wood, the Lady draws Ralph secretly apart as the Knight of the Sun sleeps. She tells Ralph she is the Lady of Abundance and gives her body to him. Then she tells him the weird legend of her life, how her birth and origin are mystery, how she was raised in seclusion by a grim and powerful sorceress whom she slew and from whom she then fled, and how many men have battled over her beauty and some have possessed it for a time.

They live a brief idyll of love in the wilderness. But the Knight of the Sun reappears, slays her in a jealous rage and falls dead with Ralph's arrow in his brain. Sorrowing, Ralph buries both of the dead and wanders on.

He falls in with his brothers, Richard and Blaise, and they take haven in the city of Whitwall and recount their adventures in knight-errantry. With his two brothers, Ralph finds his friend Clement, and after a time the three brothers part. Ralph, with Clement as his squire, rides forth to the town of

Cheaping Knowe where he hears tiding of Dorothea, that damsel he kissed at Bourton Abbas long ago and whom he encountered later in the Wood Perilous, bound for Hampton-under-Scaur and the Well at the World's End. He learns that they of the Dry Tree, or perhaps some other rogues or bandits of the wild, have seized and sold her into the bondage of the cruel and powerful Lord of Utterbol. (Tolkien fans will be amused to learn that this mysterious Lord of Utterbol is named *Gandolf*.)

Ralph and Clement ride forth to rescue Dorothea, if such can be accomplished. They pass through many adventures—for a time Ralph himself is made captive to the Lord of Utterbol—but eventually Ralph wins his freedom. Accompanied by a comrade named Redhead, Ralph rides for Utterbol, for Dorothea, and the Well.

The Well at the World's End is truly the master work of William Morris. With this book and its celebrated predecessor, *The Wood Beyond the World*, Morris founded the tradition of the heroic fantasy laid in a world invented by its author. For it is truly a William Morris world. Although the text contains a few scattered references to Babylon, the pope, the various saints, and although most of the characters' names are familiar enough in the world we know, the World of the Well is one of those delightful literary lands which (in James Branch Cabell's charming phrase) have somehow or other managed to avoid the wear and tear involved in ever having actually existed.

From the world of the *Wood* and the world of the *Well* descend all of the later worlds of fantastic literature, Poictesme and Oz and Tormance, Barsoom and Narnia and Zothique, Gormenghast and Zimiamvia and Middle-earth.

When he sketched out the map of those imagined realms which lie between Upmeads and Utterbol, William Morris blazed the first trail into the unexplored universe of fantasy.

It is now only seventy-five years since Morris published his first great venture in heroic fantasy. A man born in that milestone year of 1895 could still be hale and hearty today. What a magnificent wealth of imaginative masterpieces have been born in that small span of time! The romances of William Morris himself; and Lord Dunsany's tales of little adventures at the Edge of the World; E. R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros* and the Zimiamvia trilogy; James Branch Cabell's subtle, witty, and urbane fantasies; the works of T.H. White and A. Merritt and C.S. Lewis; Lovecraft's *Dream Quest of*

Unknown Kadath and Fletcher Pratt's *The Blue Star;* Clark Ashton Smith's mordant and lapidary tales of Zothique and Hyperborea and Atlantis; Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword* and Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan;* Fritz Leiber and Jack Vance and L. Sprague de Camp; Robert E. Howard's immortal saga of Conan the Cimmerian, and Hannes Bok's long neglected romance *Sorcerer's Ship*; the Atlantean tales of Henry Kuttner, and that mightiest masterwork of them all, *The Lord of the Rings.*

Many of the books and most of the authors will appear in the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series, now in its second year. Some of these forgotten classics of the imagination are long out of print and unavailable; many of them have not been in print for half a century until revived for the Adult Fantasy Series. Among these are the romances of William Morris.

In 1969 we have already brought back into print Morris' first great fantasy, *The Wood Beyond The World.* This new two-volume edition of *The Well at the World's End*, taken word for word from the text of the original first edition, uncut and unexpurgated, is our Morris book for 1970. Next year we hope to bring back into print again Morris' *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, perhaps to be followed by *The Glittering Plain.*

So those who have enjoyed, through these two first novels, the "fresh, scrubbed morning world of William Morris," may rest assured they have more good reading awaiting them in the years ahead.

—Lin Carter
Editorial Consultant:
The Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series

Hollis, Long Island, New York.

BOOK THREE

The Road To The Well At World's End.

CHAPTER 1

An Adventure in the Wood Under the Mountains

Now was the night worn to the time appointed, for it was two hours after midnight, so he stepped out of his tent clad in all his war gear, and went straight to the doddered oak, and found Redhead there with but one horse, whereby Ralph knew that he held to his purpose of going his ways to Utterbol: so he took him by the shoulders and embraced him, rough carle as he was, and Redhead kneeled to him one moment of time and then arose and went off into the night. But Ralph got a-horseback without delay and rode his ways warily across the highway and into the wood, and there was none to hinder him. Though it was dark but for the starlight, there was a path, which the horse, and not Ralph, found, so that he made some way even before the first glimmer of dawn, all the more as the wood was not very thick after the first mile, and there were clearings here and there.

So rode Ralph till the sun was at point to rise, and he was about the midst of one of those clearings or wood-lawns, on

the further side whereof there was more thicket, as he deemed, then he had yet come to; so he drew rein and looked about him for a minute. Even therewith he deemed he heard a sound less harsh than the cry of the jay in the beech-trees, and shriller than the moaning of the morning breeze in the wood. So he falls to listening with both ears, and this time deems that he hears the voice of a woman: and therewith came into his mind that old and dear adventure of the Wood Perilous; for he was dreamy with the past eagerness of his deeds, and the long and lonely night. But yet he doubted somewhat of the voice when it had passed his ears, so he shook his rein, for he thought it not good to tarry.

Scarce then had his horse stepped out, ere there came a woman running out of the thicket before him and made toward him over the lawn. So he gat off his horse at once and went to meet her, leading his horse; and as he drew nigh he could see that she was in a sorry plight; she had gathered up her skirts to run the better, and her legs and feet were naked: the coif was gone from her head and her black hair streamed out behind her: her gown was rent about the shoulders and bosom, so that one sleeve hung tattered, as if by the handling of some one.

So she ran up to him crying out: "Help, knight, help us!" and sank down therewith at his feet panting and sobbing. He stooped down to her, and raised her up, and said in a kind voice: "What is amiss, fair damsel, that thou art in such a plight; and what may I for thine avail? Doth any pursue thee, that thou fleest thus?"

She stood sobbing awhile, and then took hold of his two hands and said: "O fair lord, come now and help my lady! for as for me, since I am with thee, I am safe."

"Yea," said he, "Shall I get to horse at once?" And therewith he made as if he would move away from her; but she still held his hands, and seemed to think it good so to do, and she spake not for a while but gazed earnestly into his face. She was a fair woman, dark and sleek and lithe . . . for in good sooth she was none other than Agatha, who is afore told of.

Now Ralph is somewhat abashed by her eagerness, and lets

his eyes fall before hers; and he cannot but note that despite the brambles and briars of the wood that she had run through, there were no scratches on her bare legs, and that her arm was unbruised where the sleeve had been rent off.

At last she spake, but somewhat slowly, as if she were thinking of what she had to say: "O knight, by thy knightly oath I charge thee come to my lady and help and rescue her: she and I have been taken by evil men, and I fear that they will put her to shame, and torment her, ere they carry her off; for they were about tying her to a tree when I escaped: for they heeded not me who am but the maid, when they had the mistress in their hands." "Yea," said he, "and who is thy mistress?" Said the damsel: "She is the Lady of the Burnt Rock; and I fear me that these men are of the Riders of Utterbol; and then will it go hard with her; for there is naught but hatred betwixt my lord her husband and the tyrant of Utterbol." Said Ralph: "And how many were they?" "O but three, fair sir, but three," she said; "and thou so fair and strong, like the war-god himself."

Ralph laughed: "Three to one is long odds," quoth he, "but I will come with thee when thou hast let go my hands so that I may mount my horse. But wilt thou not ride behind me, fair damsel; so wearied and spent as thou wilt be by thy flight."

She looked on him curiously, and laid a hand on his breast, and the hauberk rings tinkled beneath the broidered surcoat; then she said: "Nay, I had best go afoot before thee, so disarrayed as I am."

Then she let him go, but followed him still with her eyes as he gat him into the saddle. She walked on beside his horse's head; and Ralph marvelled of her that for all her haste she had been in, she went somewhat leisurely, picking her way daintily so as to tread the smooth, and keep her feet from the rough.

Thus they went on, into the thicket and through it, and the damsel put the thorns and briars aside daintily as she stepped, and went slower still till they came to a pleasant place of oak-trees with greensward beneath them; and then she stopped, and turning, faced Ralph, and spoke with anoth-

er voice than heretofore, whereas there was naught rueful or whining therein, but somewhat both of glee and of mocking as it seemed. "Sir knight," she said, "I have a word or two for thy ears; and this is a pleasant place, and good for us to talk together, whereas it is neither too near to her, nor too far from her, so that I can easily find my way back to her. Now, lord, I pray thee light down and listen to me." And therewith she sat down on the grass by the bole of a great oak.

"But thy lady," said Ralph, "thy lady?" "O sir," she said; "My lady shall do well enough: she is not tied so fast, but she might loose herself if the need were pressing. Light down, dear lord, light down!"

But Ralph sat still on his horse, and knit his brows, and said: "What is this, damsel? hast thou been playing a play with me? Where is thy lady whom thou wouldst have me deliver? If this be but game and play, let me go my ways; for time presses, and I have a weighty errand on hand."

She rose up and came close to him, and laid a hand on his knee and looked wistfully into his face as she said: "Nay then, I can tell thee all the tale as thou sittest in thy saddle; for meseems short will be thy farewell when I have told it." And she sighed withal.

Then Ralph was ashamed to gainsay her, and she now become gentle and sweet and enticing, and sad withal; so he got off his horse and tied him to a tree, and went and stood by the damsel as she lay upon the grass, and said: "I prithee tell thy tale and let me depart if there be naught for me to do."

Then she said: "This is the first word, that as to the Red Rock, I lied; and my lady is the Queen of Utterbol, and I am her thrall, and it is I who have drawn thee hither from the camp."

The blood mounted to Ralph's brow for anger; when he called to mind how he had been led hither and thither on other folk's errands ever since he left Upmeads. But he said naught, and Agatha looked on him timidly and said: "I say I am her thrall, and I did it to serve her and because she bade me." Said Ralph roughly: "And Redhead, him whom I saved

from torments and death; dost thou know him? didst thou know him?"

"Yea," she said, "I had from him what he had learned concerning thee from the sergeants and others, and then I put words into his mouth." "Yea then," quoth Ralph, "then he also is a traitor!" "Nay, nay," she said, "he is a true man and loveth thee, and whatever he hath said to thee he troweth himself. Moreover, I tell thee here and now that all that he told thee of the affairs of Utterbol, and thine outlook there, is true and overtrue."

She sprang to her feet therewith, and stood before him and clasped her hands before him and said: "I know that thou seekest the Well at the World's End and the deliverance of the damsel whom the Lord ravished from the wild man: now I swear it by thy mouth, that if thou go to Utterbol thou art undone and shalt come to the foulest pass there, and moreover that so going thou shalt bring the uttermost shame and torments on the damsel."

Said Ralph: "Yea, but what is her case as now? tell me."

Quoth Agatha: "She is in no such evil case; for my lady hateth her not as yet, or but little; and, which is far more, my lord loveth her after his fashion, and withal as I deem feareth her; for though she hath utterly gainsaid his desire, he hath scarce so much as threatened her. A thing unheard of. Had it been another woman she had by this time known all the bitterness that leadeth unto death at Utterbol." Ralph paled and he scowled on her, then he said: "And how knowest thou all the privity of the Lord of Utterbol? who telleth thee of all this?" She smiled and spake daintily: "Many folk tell me that which I would know; and that is because whiles I conquer the tidings with my wits, and whiles buy it with my body. Anyhow what I tell thee is the very sooth concerning this damsel, and this it is: that whereas she is but in peril, she shall be in deadly peril, yea and that instant, if thou go to Utterbol, thou, who art her lover . . ." "Nay," said Ralph angrily, "I am not her lover, I am but her well-willer." "Well," quoth Agatha looking down and knitting her brows, "when thy good will towards her has become known, then shall she be thrown at once into the pit of my

lord's cruelty. Yea, to speak sooth, even as it is, for thy sake (for her I heed naught) I would that the lord might find her gone when he cometh back to Utterbol."

"Yea," said Ralph, reddening, "and is there any hope for her getting clear off?" "So I deem," said Agatha. She was silent awhile and then spake in a low voice: "It is said that each man that seeth her loveth her; yea, and will befriend her, even though she consent not to his desire. Maybe she hath fled from Utterbol."

Ralph stood silent awhile with a troubled face; and then he said: "Yet thou hast not told me the why and wherefore of this play of thine, and the beguiling me into fleeing from the camp. Tell it me that I may pardon thee and pass on."

She said: "By thine eyes I swear that this is sooth, and that there is naught else in it than this: My lady set her love, when first she set her eyes upon thee—as forsooth all women must: as for me, I had not seen thee (though I told my lady that I had) till within this hour that we met in the wood."

She sighed therewith, and with her right hand played with the rent raiment about her bosom. Then she said: "She deemed that if thou camest a mere thrall to Utterbol, though she might command thy body, yet she would not gain thy love; but that if perchance thou mightest see her in hard need, and evilly mishandled, and mightest deliver her, there might at least grow up pity in thee for her, and that love might come thereof, as oft hath happed aforetime; for my lady is a fair woman. Therefore I, who am my lady's servant and thrall, and who, I bid thee remember, had not seen thee, took upon me to make this adventure, like to a minstrel's tale done in the flesh. Also I spake to my lord and told him thereof; and though he jeered at my lady to me, he was content, because he would have her set her heart on thee utterly; since he feared her jealousy, and would fain be delivered of it, lest she should play some turn to his newly beloved damsel and do her a mischief. Therefore did he set thee free (in words) meaning, when he had thee safe at Utterbol again (as he nowise doubted to have thee) to do as he would with thee, according as occasion might serve. For at heart he hateth thee, as I could see well. So a little before

thou didst leave the camp, we, the Queen and I, went privily into a place of the woods but a little way hence. There I disarrayed both my lady and myself so far as was needful for the playing out the play which was to have seemed to thee a real adventure. Then came I to thee as if by chance hap, that I might bring thee to her; and if thou hadst come, we had a story for thee, whereby thou mightest not for very knighthood forbear to succour her and bring her whither she would, which in the long run had been Utterbol, but for the present time was to have been a certain strong-house appertaining to Utterbol, and nigh unto it. This is all the tale, and now if thou wilt, thou mayst pardon me; or if thou wilt, thou mayst draw out thy sword and smite off my head. And forsooth I deem that were the better deed."

She knelt down before him and put her palms together, and looked up at him beseechingly. His face darkened as he beheld her thus, but it cleared at last, and he said: "Damsel, thou wouldst turn out but a sorry maker, and thy play is naught. For seest thou not that I should have found out all the guile at Utterbol, and owed thy lady hatred rather than love thereafter."

"Yea," she said, "but my lady might have had enough of thy love by then, and would belike have let thee alone to fall into the hands of the Lord. Lo now! I have delivered thee from this, so that thou art quit both of the Lord and the lady and me: and again I say that thou couldst scarce have missed, both thou and thy damsel, of a miserable ending at Utterbol."

"Yea," said Ralph, softly, and as if speaking to himself, "yet am I lonely and unholpen." Then he turned to Agatha and said: "The end of all this is that I pardon thee, and must depart forthwith; for when ye two come back to the camp, then presently will the hunt be up."

She rose from her knees, and stood before him humbly and said: "Nay, I shall requite thee thy pardon thus far, that I will fashion some tale for my lady which will keep us in the woods two days or three; for we have provided victual for our adventure."

Said Ralph: "I may at least thank thee for that, and will

trust in thee to do so much." Quoth she: "Then might I ask a reward of thee: since forsooth other reward awaiteth me at Utterbol."

"Thou shalt have it," said Ralph. She said: "The reward is that thou kiss me ere we part."

"It must needs be according to my word," said Ralph, "yet I must tell thee that my kiss will bear but little love with it."

She answered naught but laid her hands on his breast and put up her face to him, and he kissed her lips. Then she said: "Knight, thou hast kissed a thrall and a guileful woman, yet one that shall smart for thee; therefore grudge not the kiss nor repent thee of thy kindness."

"How shalt thou suffer?" said he. She looked on him steadfastly a moment, and said: "Farewell! may all good go with thee." Therewith she turned away and walked off slowly through the wood, and somewhat he pitied her, and sighed as he got into his saddle; but he said to himself: "How might I help her? Yet true it is that she may well be in an evil case: I may not help everyone." Then he shook his rein and rode his ways.

CHAPTER 2

Ralph Rides the Wood Under the Mountains

A long way now rode Ralph, and naught befell him but the fashion of the wood. And as he rode, the heart within him was lightened that he had escaped from all the confusion and the lying of those aliens, who knew him not, nor his kindred, and yet would all use him each for his own ends: and withal he was glad that he was riding all alone upon his quest, but free, unwounded, and well weaponed.

The wood was not very thick whereas he rode, so that he could see the whereabouts of the sun, and rode east as far as

he could judge it. Some little victual he had with him, and he found woodland fruit ripening here and there, and eked out his bread therewith; neither did water fail him, for he rode a good way up along a woodland stream that cleft the thicket, coming down as he deemed from the mountains, and thereby he made the more way: but at last he deemed that he must needs leave it, as it turned overmuch to the north. The light was failing when he came into a woodlawn amidst of which was a pool of water, and all that day he had had no adventure with beast or man, since he had sundered from Agatha. So he lay down and slept there with his naked sword by his side, and awoke not till the sun was high in the heavens next morning. Then he arose at once and went on his way after he had washed him, and eaten a morsel.

After a little the thick of the wood gave out, and the land was no longer flat, as it had been, but was of dales and of hills, not blinded by trees. In this land he saw much deer, as hart and wild swine; and he happened also on a bear, who was about a honey tree, and had taken much comb from the wild bees. On him Ralph drew his sword and drave him exceeding loth from his purchase, so that the knight dined off the bear's thieving. Another time he came across a bent where on the south side grew vines well fruited, and the grapes a-ripening; and he ate well thereof before he went on his way.

Before nightfall he came on that same stream again, and it was now running straight from the east; so he slept that night on the bank thereof. On the morrow he rode up along it a great way, till again it seemed to be coming overmuch from the north; and then he left it, and made on east as near as he could guess it by the sun.

Now he passed through thickets at whiles not very great, and betwixt them rode hilly land grassed mostly with long coarse grass, and with whin and thorn-trees scattered about. Thence he saw again from time to time the huge wall of the mountains rising up into the air like a great black cloud that would swallow up the sky, and though the sight was terrible, yet it gladdened him, since he knew that he was on the right way. So far he rode, going on the whole up-hill, till at last

there was a great pine-wood before him, so that he could see no ending to it either north or south.

It was now late in the afternoon, and Ralph pondered whether he should abide the night where he was and sleep the night there, or whether he should press on in hope of winning to some clear place before dark. So whereas he was in a place both rough and waterless, he deemed it better to go on, after he had rested his horse and let him bite the herbage a while. Then he rode his ways, and entered the wood and made the most of the way.

CHAPTER 3

Ralph Meeteth With Another Adventure in the Wood Under the Mountain

Soon the wood grew very thick of pine-trees, though there was no undergrowth, so that when the sun sank it grew dark very speedily; but he still rode on in the dusk, and there were but few wild things, and those mostly voiceless, in the wood, and it was without wind and very still. Now he thought he heard the sound of a horse going behind him or on one side, and he wondered whether the chace were up, and hastened what he might, till at last it grew black night, and he was constrained to abide. So he got off his horse, and leaned his back against a tree, and had the beast's reins over his arm; and now he listened again carefully, and was quite sure that he could hear the footsteps of some hard-footed beast going nowise far from him. He laughed inwardly, and said to himself: "If the chacer were to pass but three feet from my nose he should be none the wiser but if he hear me or my horse." And therewith he cast a lap of his cloak over the horse's head, lest he should whinny if he became aware of the other beast; and so there he stood abiding, and the noise

grew greater till he could hear clearly the horse-hoofs drawing nigh, till they came very nigh, and then stopped.

Then came a man's voice that said: "Is there a man anigh in the wood?"

Ralph held his peace till he should know more; and the voice spake again in a little while: "If there be a man anigh let him be sure that I will do him no hurt; nay, I may do him good, for I have meat with me." Clear was the voice, and as sweet as the April blackbird sings. It spake again: "Naught answereth, yet meseemeth I know surely that a man is anigh; and I am aweary of the waste, and long for fellowship."

Ralph hearkened, and called to mind tales of way-farers entrapped by wood-wives and evil things; but he thought: "At least this is no sending of the Lord of Utterbol, and, St. Nicholas to aid, I have little fear of wood-wights. Withal I shall be but a dastard if I answer not one man, for fear of I know not what." So he spake in a loud and cheerful voice: "Yea, there is a man anigh, and I desire thy fellowship, if we might but meet. But how shall we see each other in the blackness of the wildwood night?"

The other laughed, and the laugh sounded merry and sweet, and the voice said: "Hast thou no flint and fire-steel?" "No," said Ralph. "But I have," said the voice, "and I am fain to see thee, for thy voice soundeth pleasant to me. Abide till I grope about for a stick or two."

Ralph laughed in turn, as he heard the new-comer moving about; then he heard the click of the steel on the flint, and saw the sparks showering down, so that a little piece of the wood grew green again to his eyes. Then a little clear flame sprang up, and therewith he saw the tree-stems clearly, and some twenty yards from him a horse, and a man stooping down over the fire, who sprang up now and cried out: "It is a knight-at-arms! Come hither, fellow of the waste; it is five days since I have spoken to a child of Adam; so come nigh and speak to me, and as a reward of thy speech thou shalt have both meat and firelight."

"That will be well paid," said Ralph laughing, and he stepped forward leading his horse, for now the wood was light all about, as the fire waxed and burned clear; so that

Ralph could see that the new-comer was clad in quaintly-fashioned armour after the fashion of that land, with a bright steel sallet on the head, and a long green surcoat over the body armour. Slender of make was the new-comer, not big nor tall of stature.

Ralph went up to him hastily, and merrily put his hand on his shoulder, and kissed him, saying: "The kiss of peace in the wilderness to thee!" And he found him smooth-faced and sweet-breathed.

But the new comer took his hand and led him to where the firelight was brightest and looked on him silently a while; and Ralph gave back the look. The strange-wrought sallet hid but little of the new comer's face, and as Ralph looked thereon a sudden joy came into his heart, and he cried out: "O, but I have kissed thy face before! O, my friend, my friend!"

Then spake the new-comer and said: "Yea, I am a woman, and I was thy friend for a little while at Bourton Abbas, and at the want-ways of the Wood Perilous."

Then Ralph cast his arms about her and kissed her again; but she withdrew her from him, and said: "Help me, my friend, that we may gather sticks to feed our fire, lest it die and the dark come again so that we see not each other's faces, and think that we have but met in a dream."

Then she busied herself with gathering the kindling; but presently she looked up at him, and said: "Let us make the wood shine wide about, for this is a feastful night."

So they gathered a heap of wood and made the fire great; and then Ralph did off his helm and hauberk and the damsel did the like, so that he could see the shapeliness of her uncovered head. Then they sat down before the fire, and the damsel drew meat and drink from her saddle-bags, and gave thereof to Ralph, who took it of her and her hand withal, and smiled on her and said: "Shall we be friends together as we were at Bourton Abbas and the want-ways of the Wood Perilous?" She shook her head and said: "If it might be! but it may not be. Not many days have worn since then; but they have brought about changed days." He looked on her wistfully and said: "But thou wert dear to me then."

"Yea," she said, "and thou to me; but other things have befallen, and there is change betwixt."

"Nay, what change?" said Ralph.

Even by the firelight he saw that she reddened as she answered: "I was a free woman then; now am I but a runaway thrall." Then Ralph laughed merrily, and said, "Then are we brought the nigher together, for I also am a runaway thrall."

She smiled and looked down: then she said: "Wilt thou tell me how that befell?"

"Yea," said he, "but I will ask thee first a question or two." She nodded a yeasay, and looked on him soberly, as a child waiting to say its task.

Said Ralph: "When we parted at the want-ways of the Wood Perilous thou saidst that thou wert minded for the Well at the World's End, and to try it for life or death. But thou hadst not then the necklace, which now I see thee bear, and which, seest thou! is like to that about my neck. Wilt thou tell me whence thou hadst it?"

She said: "Yea; it was given unto me by a lady, mighty as I deem, and certainly most lovely, who delivered me from an evil plight, and a peril past words, but whereof I will tell thee afterwards. And she it was who told me of the way to the Well at the World's End, and many matters concerning them that seek it, whereof thou shalt wot soon."

Said Ralph: "As to how thou wert made a thrall thou needest not to tell me; for I have learned that of those that had to do with taking thee to Utterbol. But tell me; here are met we two in the pathless wilds, as if it were on the deep sea, and we two seeking the same thing. Didst thou deem that we should meet, or that I should seek thee?"

Now was the fire burning somewhat low, but he saw that she looked on him steadily; yet withal her sweet voice trembled a little as she answered: "Kind friend, I had a hope that thou wert seeking me and wouldst find me: for indeed that fairest of women who gave me the beads spake to me of thee, and said that thou also wouldst turn thee to the quest of the Well at the World's End; and already had I deemed thine eyes lucky as well as lovely. But tell me, my friend, what has

befallen that lady that she is not with thee? For in such wise she spake of thee, that I deemed that naught would sunder you save death."

"It is death that hath sundered us," said Ralph.

Then she hung her head, and sat silent a while, neither did he speak till she had risen up and cast more wood upon the fire; and she stood before it with her back towards him. Then he spake to her in a cheerful voice and said: "Belike we shall be long together: tell me thy name; is it not Dorothy?" She turned about to him with a smiling face, and said: "Nay lord, nay: did I not tell thee my name before? They that held me at the font bid the priest call me Ursula, after the Friend of Maidens. But what is thy name?"

"I am Ralph of Upmeads," quoth he; and sat a while silent, pondering his dream and how it had betrayed him as to her name, when it had told him much that he yet deemed true.

She came and sat down by him again, and said to him: "Thy questions I have answered; but thou hast not yet told me the tale of thy captivity." Her voice sounded exceeding sweet to him, and he looked on her face and spake as kindly as he knew how, and said: "A short tale it is to-night at least: I came from Whitwall with a Company of Chapmen, and it was thee I was seeking and the Well at the World's End. All went well with me, till I came to Goldburg, and there I was betrayed by a felon, who had promised to lead me safe to Utterness, and tell me concerning the way unto the Well. But he sold me to the Lord of Utterbol, who would lead me to his house; which irked me not, at first, because I looked to find thee there. Thereafter, if for shame I may tell the tale, his lady and wife cast her love upon me, and I was entangled in the nets of guile: yet since I was told, and believed that it would be ill both for thee and for me if I met thee at Utterbol, I took occasion to flee away, I will tell thee how another while."

She had turned pale as she heard him, and now she said: "It is indeed God's mercy that thou camest not to Utterbol nor foundest me there, for then had both we been undone amidst the lusts of those two; or that thou camest not there

to find me fled, else hadst thou been undone. My heart is sick to think of it, even as I sit by thy side."

Said Ralph: "Thy last word maketh me afraid and ashamed to ask thee a thing. But tell me first, is that Lord of Utterbol as evil as men's fear would make him? for no man is feared so much unless he is deemed evil."

She was silent a while, and then she said: "He is so evil that it might be deemed that he has been brought up out of hell."

Then Ralph looked sore troubled, and he said: "Dear friend, this is the thing hard for me to say. In what wise did they use thee at Utterbol? Did they deal with thee shamefully?" She answered him quietly: "Nay," she said, "fear not! no shame befell me, save that I was a thrall and not free to depart. Forsooth," she said, smiling, "I fled away timely before the tormentors should be ready. Forsooth it is an evil house and a mere piece of hell. But now we are out of it and free in the wildwood, so let us forget it; for indeed it is a grief to remember it. And now once more let us mend the fire, for thy face is growing dim to me, and that misliketh me. Afterwards before we lie down to sleep we will talk a little of the way, whitherward we shall turn our faces tomorrow."

So they cast on more wood, and pineapples, and sweet it was to Ralph to see her face come clear again from out the mirk of the wood. Then they sat down again together and she said: "We two are seeking the Well at the World's End; now which of us knows more of the way? who is to lead, and who to follow?" Said Ralph: "If thou know no more than I, it is little that thou knowest. Sooth it is that for many days past I have sought thee that thou mightest lead me."

She laughed sweetly, and said: "Yea, knight, and was it for that cause that thou soughtest me, and not for my deliverance?" He said soberly: "Yet in very deed I set myself to deliver thee." "Yea," she said, "then since I am delivered, I must needs deem of it as if it were through thy deed. And as I suppose thou lookest for a reward therefor, so thy reward shall be, that I will lead thee to the Well at the World's End. Is it enough?" "Nay," said Ralph. They held their peace a

minute, then she said: "Maybe when we have drunk of that Water and are coming back, it will be for thee to lead. For true it is that I shall scarce know whither to wend; since amidst of my dreaming of the Well, and of ... other matters, my home that was is gone like a dream."

He looked at her, but scarce as if he were heeding all her words. Then he spoke: "Yea, thou shalt lead me. I have been led by one or another ever since I have left Upmeads." Now she looked on him somewhat ruefully, and said: "Thou wert not hearkening e'en now; so I say it again, that the time shall come when thou shalt lead me."

In Ralph's mind had sprung up again that journey from the Water of the Oak-tree; so he strove with himself to put the thought from him, and sighed and said: "Dost thou verily know much of the way?" She nodded yeasay. "Knowest thou of the Rock of the Fighting Man?" "Yea," she said. "And of the Sage that dwelleth in this same wood?" "Most surely," she said, "and to-morrow evening or the morrow after we shall find him; for I have been taught the way to his dwelling; and I wot that he is now called the Sage of Swevenham. Yet I must tell thee that there is some peril in seeking to him; whereas his dwelling is known of the Utterbol riders, who may follow us thither. And yet again I deem that he will find some remedy thereto."

Said Ralph: "Whence didst thou learn all this, my friend?" And his face grew troubled again; but she said simply: "She taught it to me who spake to me in the wood by Hampton under Scaur."

She made as if she noted not the trouble in his face, but said: "Put thy trust in this, that here and with me thou art even now nigher to the Well at the World's End than any other creature on the earth. Yea, even if the Sage of Swevenham be dead or gone hence, yet have I tokens to find the Rock of the Fighting Man, and the way through the mountains, though I say not but that he may make it all clearer. But now I see thee drooping with the grief of days bygone; and I deem also that thou art weary with the toil of the way. So I rede thee lie down here in the wilderness and sleep, and forget grief till to-morrow is a new day."

"Would it were come," said he, "that I might see thy face the clearer; yet I am indeed weary."

So he went and fetched his saddle and lay down with his head thereon; and was presently asleep. But she, who had again cast wood on the fire, sat by his head watching him with a drawn sword beside her, till the dawn of the woodland began to glimmer through the trees: then she also laid herself down and slept.

CHAPTER 4

They Ride the Wood Under the Mountains

When Ralph woke on the morrow it was broad day as far as the trees would have it so. He rose at once, and looked about for his fellow, but saw her not, and for some moments of time he thought he had but dreamed of her; but he saw that the fire had been quickened from its embers, and close by lay the hauberk and strange-fashioned helm, and the sword of the damsel, and presently he saw her coming through the trees barefoot, with the green-sleeved silken surcoat hanging below the knees and her hair floating loose about her. She stepped lightly up to Ralph with a cheerful smiling countenance and a ruddy colour in her cheeks, but her eyes moist as if she could scarce keep back the tears for joy of the morning's meeting. He thought her fairer than erst, and made as if he would put his arms about her, but she held a little aloof from him, blushing yet more. Then she said in her sweet clear voice: "Hail fellow-farer! now begins the day's work. I have been down yonder, and have found a bright woodland pool, to wash the night off me, and if thou wilt do in likewise and come back to me, I will dight our breakfast meantime, and will we speedily to the road." He did as she bade him, thinking of her all the while till he came

back to her fresh and gay. Then he looked to their horses and gave them fodder gathered from the pool-side, and so turned to Ursula and found her with the meat ready dight; so they ate and were glad.

When they had broken their fast Ralph went to saddle the horses, and coming back found Ursula binding up her long hair, and she smiled on him and said: "Now we are for the road I must be an armed knight again: forsooth I unbound my hair e'en now and let my surcoat hang loose about me in token that thou wottest my secret. Soothly, my friend, it irks me that now we have met after a long while, I must needs be clad thus graceless. But need drave me to it, and withal the occasion that was given to me to steal this gay armour from a lad at Utterbol, the nephew of the lord; who like his eme was half my lover, half my tyrant. Of all which I will tell thee hereafter, and what wise I must needs steer betwixt stripes and kisses these last days. But now let us arm and to horse. Yet first lo you, here are some tools that in thine hands shall keep us from sheer famine: as for me I am no archer; and forsooth no man-at-arms save in seeming."

Therewith she showed him a short Turk bow and a quiver of arrows, which he took well pleased. So then they armed each the other, and as she handled Ralph's wargear she said: "How well-wrought and trusty is this hauberk of thine, my friend; my coat is but a toy to it, with its gold and silver rings and its gemmed collar: and thy plates be thick and wide and well-wrought, whereas mine are little more than adornments to my arms and legs."

He looked on her lovingly and loved her shapely hands amidst the dark grey mail, and said: "That is well, dear friend, for since my breast is a shield for thee it behoves it to be well covered." She looked at him, and her lips trembled, and she put out her hand as if to touch his cheek, but drew it back again and said: "Come now, let us to horse, dear fellow in arms."

So they mounted and went their ways through a close pine-wood, where the ground was covered with the pine-tree needles, and all was still and windless. So as they rode said Ursula: "I seek tokens of the way to the Sage of Sweven-

ham. Hast thou seen a water yesterday?" "Yea," said Ralph, "I rode far along it, but left it because I deemed that it turned north overmuch." "Thou wert right," she said, "besides that thy turning from it hath brought us together; for it would have brought thee to Utterbol at last. But now have we to hit upon another that runneth straight down from the hills: not the Great Mountains, but the high ground whereon is the Sage's dwelling. I know not whether the ride be long or short; but the stream is to lead us."

On they rode through the wood, wherein was little change for hours; and as they rested Ursula gave forth a deep breath, as one who has cast off a load of care. And Ralph said: "Why sighest thou, fellow-farer?" "O," she said, "it is for pleasure, and a thought that I had: for a while ago I was a thrall, living amongst fears that sickened the heart; and then a little while I was a lonely wanderer, and now ... Therefore I was thinking that if ever I come back to mine own land and my home, the scent of a pine-wood shall make me happy."

Ralph looked on her eagerly, but said naught for a while; but at last he spoke: "Tell me, friend," said he, "if we be met by strong-thieves on the way, what shall we do then?"

"It is not like to befall," she said, "for men fear the wood, therefore is there little prey for thieves therein: but if we chance on them, the token of Utterbol on mine armour shall make them meek enough." Then she fell silent a while, and spoke again: "True it is that we may be followed by the Utterbol riders; for though they also fear the wood, they fear it not so much as they fear their Lord. Howbeit, we be well ahead, and it is little like that we shall be overtaken before we have met the Sage; and then belike he shall provide."

"Yea," said Ralph, "but what if the chase come up with us: shall we suffer us to be taken alive?" She looked on him solemnly, laid her hand on the beads about her neck, and answered: "By this token we must live as long as we may, whatsoever may befall; for at the worst may some road of escape be opened to us. Yet O, how far easier it were to die than to be led back to Utterbol!"

A while they rode in silence, both of them: but at last

spake Ralph, but slowly and in a dull and stern voice: "Maybe it were good that thou told me somewhat of the horrors and evil days of Utterbol?" "Maybe," she said, "but I will not tell thee of them. Forsooth there are some things which a man may not easily tell to a man, be he never so much his friend as thou art to me. But bethink thee" (and she smiled somewhat) "that this gear belieth me, and that I am but a woman; and some things there be which a woman may not tell to a man, nay, not even when he hath held her long in his arms." And therewith she flushed exceedingly. But he said in a kind voice: "I am sorry that I asked thee, and will ask thee no more thereof." She smiled on him friendly, and they spake of other matters as they rode on.

But after a while Ralph said: "If it were no misease to thee to tell me how thou didst fall into the hands of the men of Utterbol, I were fain to hear the tale."

She laughed outright, and said: "Why wilt thou be forever harping on the time of my captivity, friend? And thou who knowest the story somewhat already? Howbeit, I may tell thee thereof without heart-burning, though it be a felon tale."

He said, somewhat shame-facedly: "Take it not ill that I am fain to hear of thee and thy life-days, since we are become fellow-farers."

"Well," she said, "this befell outside Utterbol, so I will tell thee.

"After I had stood in the thrall-market at Cheaping Knowe, and not been sold, the wild man led me away toward the mountains that are above Goldburg; and as we drew near to them on a day, he said to me that he was glad to the heart-root that none had cheapened me at the said market; and when I asked him wherefore, he fell a weeping as he rode beside me, and said: 'Yet would God that I had never taken thee.' I asked what ailed him, though indeed I deemed that I knew. He said: 'This aileth me, that though thou art not of the blood wherein I am bound to wed, I love thee sorely, and would have thee to wife; and now I deem that thou wilt not love me again.' I said that he guessed aright, but that if he would do friendly with me, I would be no less

than a friend to him. 'That availeth little,' quoth he; 'I would have thee be mine of thine own will.' I said that might not be, that I could love but one man alone. 'Is he alive?' said he. 'Goodsooth, I hope so,' said I, 'but if he be dead, then is desire of men dead within me.'

"So we spake, and he was downcast and heavy of mood; but thenceforward was he no worse to me than a brother. And he proffered it to lead me back, if I would, and put me safely on the way to Whitwall; but, as thou wottest, I had need to go forward, and no need to go back.

"Thus we entered into the mountains of Goldburg; but one morning, when he arose, he was heavier of mood than his wont, and was restless withal, and could be steadfast neither in staying nor going, nor aught else. So I asked what ailed him, and he said: 'My end draweth nigh; I have seen my fetch, and am fey. My grave abideth me in these mountains.' 'Thou hast been dreaming ugly dreams,' said I, 'such things are of no import.' And I spoke lightly, and strove to comfort him. He changed not his mood for all that; but said: 'This is ill for thee also; for thou wilt be worser without me than with me in these lands.' Even so I deemed, and withal I was sorry for him, for though he were uncouth and ungainly, he was no ill man. So against my will I tumbled into the same-like mood as his, and we both fared along drearily. But about sunset, as we came round a corner of the cliffs of those mountains, or ever we were ware we happed upon a half-score of weaponed men, who were dighting a camp under a big rock thereby: but four there were with them who were still a-horseback; so that when Bull Nosy (for that was his name) strove to flee away with me, it was of no avail; for the said horsemen took us, and brought us before an evil-looking man, who, to speak shortly, was he whom thou hast seen, to wit, the Lord of Utterbol: he took no heed of Bull Nosy, but looked on me closely, and handled me as a man doth with a horse at a cheaping, so that I went nigh to smiting him, whereas I had a knife in my bosom, but the chaplet refrained me. To make a short tale of it, he bade Bull sell me to him, which Bull utterly naysaid, standing stiff and stark before the Lord, and scowling on him. But the

Lord laughed in his face and said: 'So be it, for I will take her without a price, and thank thee for sparing my gold.' Then said Bull: 'If thou take her as a thrall, thou wert best take me also; else shall I follow thee as a free man and slay thee when I may. Many are the days of the year, and on some one of them will betide the occasion for the knife.'

"Thereat the Lord waxed very pale, and spake not, but looked at that man of his who stood by Bull with a great sword in his fist, and lifted up his hand twice, and let it fall twice, whereat that man stepped back one pace, and swung his sword, and smote Bull, and clave his skull.

"Then the colour came into the Lord's face again, and he said: 'Now, vassals, let us dine and be merry, for at least we have found something in the mountains.' So they fell to and ate and drank, and victual was given to me also, but I had no will to eat, for my soul was sick and my heart was heavy, foreboding the uttermost evil. Withal I was sorry for Bull Nosy, for he was no ill man and had become my friend.

"So they abode there that night, leaving Bull lying like a dog unburied in the wilderness; and on the morrow they took the road to Utterbol, and went swiftly, having no baggage, and staying but for victual, and for rest every night. The Lord had me brought to him on that first evening of our journey, and he saw me privily and spake to me, bidding me do shameful things, and I would not; wherefore he threatened me grievously; and, I being alone with him, bade him beware lest I should slay him or myself. Thereat he turned pale, as he had done before Bull Nosy, yet sent for none to slay me, but only bade me back to my keepers. And so I came to Utterbol unscathed."

"And at Utterbol," said Ralph, "what befell thee there?" Ursula smiled on him, and held up her finger; yet she answered: "Utterbol is a very great house in a fair land, and there are sundry roofs and many fair chambers. There was I brought to a goodly chamber amidst a garden; and women servants were given me who led me to the bath and clad me in dainty raiment, and gave me to eat and to drink, and all that I needed. That is all my tale for this time."

CHAPTER 5

They Come on the Sage of Swevenham

Night was at hand before they came to the stream that they sought. They found it cleaving the pine-wood, which held on till the very bank of it, and was thick again on the further side in a few yards' space. The stream was high-banked and ran deep and strong. Said Ursula as they came up to it: "We may not cross it, but it matters not; and it is to-morrow that we must ride up along it."

So they abode there, and made a fire by the waterside, and watched there, turn and turn about, till it was broad day. Naught befell to tell of, save that twice in the night Ralph deemed that he heard a lion roar.

They got to horse speedily when they were both awake, and rode up the stream, and began to go up hill, and by noon were come into a rough and shaggy upland, whence from time to time they could see the huge wall of the mountains, which yet seemed to Ralph scarce nigher, if at all, than when he had beheld it ere he had come to Vale Turris. The way was rough day-long, and now and again they found it hard to keep the stream in sight, as especially when it cleft a hill, and ran between sheer cliffs with no low shore on either side.

They made way but slowly, so that at last Ralph lost patience somewhat, and said that he had but little hope of falling in with the Sage that day or any day. But Ursula was of good cheer, and mocked him merrily but sweetly, till his heart was lightened again. Withal she bade him seek some venison, since they were drawing out the time, and she knew not how long it would be ere they came to the Sage's dwelling. Therefore he betook him to the Turk bow, and shot

a leash of heath-fowl, and they supped on the meat merrily in the wilderness.

But if they were merry, they were soon weary; for they journeyed on after sunset that night, since the moon was up, and there was no thick wood to turn dusk into dark for them. Their resting-place was a smooth piece of greensward betwixt the water and a half circle of steep bent that well nigh locked it about.

There then they abode, and in the stillness of the night heard a thundering sound coming down the wind to them, which they deemed was the roaring of distant waters; and when they went to the lip of the river they saw flocks of foam floating by, wherefore they thought themselves to be near some great mountain-neck whereover the water was falling from some high place. But with no to-do they lay down upon the greensward this second night of their fellowship, and waked later than on the day before; for so weary had they been, that they had kept but ill watch in the dark night, and none at all after dawn began to glimmer.

Now Ralph sat up and saw Ursula still sleeping; then he rose to his feet and looked about him, and saw their two horses cropping the grass under the bent, and beside them a man, tall and white bearded, leaning on his staff. Ralph caught up his sword and went toward the man, and the sun gleamed from the blade just as the hoary-one turned to him; he lifted up his staff as if in greeting to Ralph, and came toward him, and even therewith Ursula awoke and arose, and saw the greybeard at once; and she cried out: "Take heed to thy sword, fellow-farer, for, praised be the saints, this is the Sage of Swevenham!"

So they stood there together till the Sage came up to them and kissed them both, and said: "I am glad that ye are come at last; for I looked for you no later than this. So now mount your horses and come with me straightway; because life is short to them who have not yet drunk of the Well at the World's End. Moreover if ye chance to come on the riders of Utterbol, it shall go hard with you unless I be at hand."

Ralph saw of him that though he was an old hoar man to look on, yet he was strong and sturdy, tall, and of goodly

presence, with ruddy cheeks, and red lips and bright eyes, and that the skin of his face and hands was nowise wrinkled: but about his neck was a pair of beads like unto his own gossip's gift.

So now they mounted at once, and with no more words he led them about the bent, and they came in a little while into the wood again, but this time it was of beech, with here and there an open place sprinkled about with hollies and thorns; and they rode down the wide slope of a long hill, and up again on the other side.

Thus they went for an hour, and the elder spake not again, though it might have been deemed by his eyes that he was eager and fain. They also held their peace; for the hope and fear of their hearts kept them from words.

They came to the hill-top, and found a plain land, though the close wood still held on a while; but soon they rode into a clearing of some twelve acres, where were fenced crofts with goats therein, and three garths of tillage, wherein the wheat-shocks were yet standing, and there were coleworts and other pot-herbs also. But at the further end, whereas the wood closed in again, was a little house builded of timber, strong and goodly, and thatched with wheat-straw; and beside it was a bubbling spring which ran in a brook athwart the said clearing; over the house-door was a carven rood, and a bow and short spear were leaned against the wall of the porch.

Ralph looked at all closely, and wondered whether this were perchance the cot wherein the Lady of Abundance had dwelt with the evil witch. But the elder looked on him, and said: "I know thy thought, and it is not so; that house is far away hence; yet shalt thou come thereto. Now, children, welcome to the house of him who hath found what ye seek, but hath put aside the gifts which ye shall gain; and who belike shall remember what ye shall forget."

Therewith he brought them into the house, and into a chamber, the plenishing whereof was both scanty and rude. There he bade them sit, and brought them victual, to wit, cheese and goats' milk and bread, and they fell to speech concerning the woodland ways, and the seasons, and other unweighty matters. But as for the old man he spoke but few

words, and as one unused to speech, albeit he was courteous and debonair. But when they had eaten and drunk he spake to them and said:

"Ye have sought to me because ye would find the Well at the World's End, and would have lore of me concerning the road thereto; but before I tell you what ye would, let me know what ye know thereof already."

Quoth Ralph: "For me, little enough I know, save that I must come to the Rock of the Fighting Man, and that thou knowest the way thither."

"And thou, damsel," quoth the long-hoary, "what knowest thou? Must I tell thee of the way through the mountains and the Wall of the World, and the Winter Valley, and the Folk Innocent, and the Cot on the Way, and the Forest of Strange Things and the Dry Tree?"

"Nay," she said, "of all this I wot somewhat, but it may be not enough."

Said the Sage: "Even so it was with me, when a many years ago I dwelt nigh to Swevenham, and folk sought to me for lore, and I told them what I knew; but maybe it was not enough, for they never came back; but died belike or ever they had seen the Well. And then I myself, when I was gotten very old, fared thither a-seeking it, and I found it; for I was one of those who bore the chaplet of the seekers. And now I know all, and can teach all. But tell me, damsel, whence hadst thou this lore?"

Said Ursula: "I had it of a very fair woman who, as it seemeth, was Lady and Queen of the Champions of Hampton under the Scaur, not far from mine own land."

"Yea," quoth the Sage, "and what hath befallen her? . . . Nay, nay," said he, "I need not ask; for I can see by your faces that she is dead. Therefore hath she been slain, or otherwise she had not been dead. So I ask you if ye were her friends?"

Quoth Ursula; "Surely she was my friend, since she befriended me; and this man I deem was altogether her friend."

Ralph hung his head, and the Sage gazed on him, but said naught. Then he took a hand of each of them in his hands,

and held them a while silently, and Ralph was still downcast and sad, but Ursula looked on him fondly.

Then spake the Sage: "So it is, Knight, that now I seem to understand what manner of man thou art, and I know what is between you two; whereof I will say naught, but will let the tree grow according to its seed. Moreover, I wot now that my friend of past years would have me make you both wise in the lore of the Well at the World's End; and when I have done this, I can do no more, but let your good hap prevail if so it may. Abide a little, therefore."

Then he went unto an ark, and took thence a book wrapped in a piece of precious web of silk and gold, and bound in cuir-bouilly wrought in strange devices. Then said he: "This book was mine heritage at Swevenham or ever I became wise, and it came from my father's grandsire: and my father bade me look on it as the dearest of possessions; but I heeded it naught till my youth had waned, and my manhood was full of weariness and grief. Then I turned to it, and read in it, and became wise, and the folk sought to me, and afterwards that befell which was foredoomed. Now herein amongst other matters is written of that which ye desire to know, and I will read the same to you and expound it. Yet were it not well to read in this book under a roof, nay, though it be as humble and innocent as this. Moreover, it is not meet that ye should hearken to this wisdom of old times clad as ye are; thou, knight, in the raiment of the manslayer, with the rod of wrath hanging at thy side; and thou, maiden, attired in the garments of the tyrant, which were won of him by lying and guile."

Then he went to another ark, and took from it two bundles, which he gave, the one to Ralph, the other to Ursula, and said: "Thou, maiden, go thou into the inner chamber here and doff thy worldly raiment, and don that which thou wilt find wrapped in this cloth; and thou, knight, take this other and get thee into the thicket which is behind the house, and there do the like, and abide there till we come to thee."

So Ralph took the bundle, and came out into the thicket and unarmed him, and did on the raiment which he found in

the cloth, which was but a long gown of white linen, much like to an alb, broidered about the wrists and the hems and collar with apparels of gold and silk, girt with a red silk girdle. There he abode a little, wondering at all these things and all that had befallen him since he had left Upmeads.

Anon the two others came to him, and Ursula was clad in the same-like raiment and the elder had the book in his hand. He smiled on Ralph and nodded friendly to him. As to Ursula, she flushed as red as a rose when she set eyes on him, for she said to herself that he was as one of the angels which she had seen painted in the choir of St. Mary's at Higham.

CHAPTER 6

Those Two Are Learned Lore by the Sage of Swevenham

Now the Sage led them through the wood till they came to a grassy lawn amidst of which was a table of stone, which it seemed to Ralph must be like to that whereon the witch-wife had offered up the goat to her devils as the Lady of Abundance had told him; and he changed countenance as the thought came into his mind. But the Sage looked on him and shook his head and spake softly: "In these wastes and wilds are many such-like places, where of old time the ancient folks did worship to the Gods of the Earth as they imagined them: and whereas the lore in this book cometh of such folk, this is no ill place for the reading thereof. But if ye fear the book and its writers, who are dead long ago, there is yet time to go back and seek the Well without my helping; and I say not but that ye may find it even thus. But if ye fear not, then sit ye down on the grass, and I will lay the book on this most ancient table, and read in it, and do ye hearken heedfully."

So they sat down side by side, and Ralph would have taken Ursula's hand to caress it, but she drew it away from him;

howbeit she found it hard to keep her eyes from off him. The Elder looked on them soberly, but nowise in anger, and presently began reading in the book. What he read shall be seen hereafter in the process of this tale; for the more part thereof had but to do with the way to the Well at the World's End, all things concerning which were told out fully, both great and small. Long was this a-reading, and when the Sage had done, he bade now one, now the other answer him questions as to what he had read; and if they answered amiss he read that part again, and yet again, as children are taught in the school. Until at last when he asked any question Ralph or the maiden answered it rightly at once; and by this time the sun was about to set. So he bade them home to his house that they might eat and sleep there.

"But to-morrow," said he, "I shall give you your last lesson from this book, and thereafter ye shall go your ways to the Rock of the Fighting Man, and I look not for it that ye shall come to any harm on the way; but whereas I seem to-day to have seen the foes of Utterbol seeking you, I will lead you forth a little."

So they went home to the house, and he made them the most cheer that he might, and spake to them in friendly and pleasant mood, so that they were merry.

When it was morning they went again to the ancient altar, and again they learned lore from the Elder, till they were waxen wise in the matters of the Well at the World's End, and long they sat and hearkened him till it was evening again, and once more they slept in the house of the Sage of Swevenham.

CHAPTER 7

An Adventure by the Way

When morrow dawned they arose betimes and did on their worldly raiment; and when they had eaten a morsel they made them ready for the road, and the elder gave them victual for the way in their saddle-bags, saying: "This shall suffice for the passing days, and when it is gone ye have learned what to do."

Therewithall they gat to horse; but Ralph would have the Elder ride his nag, while he went afoot by the side of Ursula. So the Sage took his bidding, but smiled therewith, and said: "Thou art a King's son and a friendly young man, else had I said nay to this; for it needeth not, whereas I am stronger than thou, so hath my draught of the Well dealt with me."

Thus then they went their ways; but Ralph noted of Ursula that she was silent and shy with him, and it irked him so much, that at last he said to her: "My friend, doth aught ail me with thee? Wilt thou not tell me, so that I may amend it? For thou are grown of few words with me and turnest thee from me, and seemest as if thou heedest me little. Thou art as a fair spring morning gone cold and overcast in the afternoon. What is it then? we are going a long journey together, and belike shall find little help or comfort save in each other; and ill will it be if we fall asunder in heart, though we be nigh in body."

She laughed and reddened therewithal; and then her countenance fell and she looked piteously on him and said: "If I seemed to thee as thou sayest, I am sorry; for I meant not to be thus with thee as thou deemest. But so it is that I was thinking of this long journey, and of thee and me together in

it, and how we shall be with each other if we come back again alive, with all things done that we had to do."

She stayed her speech awhile, and seemed to find it hard to give forth the word that was in her; but at last she said: "Friend, thou must pardon me; but that which thou sawest in me, I also seemed to see in thee, that thou wert grown shy and cold with me; but now I know it is not so, since thou hast seen me wrongly; but that I have seen thee wrongly, as thou hast me."

Therewith she reached her hand to him, and he took it and kissed it and caressed it while she looked fondly at him, and they fared on sweetly and happily together. But as this was a-saying and a-doing betwixt them, and a while after, they had heeded the Elder little or not at all, though he rode on the right hand of Ralph. And for his part the old man said naught to them and made as if he heard them not, when they spake thuswise together.

Now they rode the wood on somewhat level ground for a while; then the trees began to thin, and the ground grew broken; and at last it was very rugged, with high hills and deep valleys, and all the land populous of wild beasts, so that about sunset they heard thrice the roar of a lion. But ever the Sage led them by winding ways that he knew, round the feet of the hills, along stream-sides for the most part, and by passes over the mountain-necks when they needs must, which was twice in the day.

Dusk fell on them in a little valley, through which ran a stream bushed about its edges, and which for the rest was grassy and pleasant, with big sweet-chestnut trees scattered about it.

"Now," quoth the Elder; "two things we have to beware of in this valley, the lions first; which, though belike they will not fall upon weaponed men, may well make an onslaught on your horses, if they wind them; and the loss of the beasts were sore to you as now. But the second thing is the chase from Utterbol. As to the lions, if ye build up a big fire, and keep somewhat aloof from the stream and its bushes, and tether you horses anigh the fire, ye will have no harm of them."

"Yea," said Ralph, "but if the riders of Utterbol are anigh us, shall we light a candle for them to show them the way?" Said the Sage: "Were ye by yourselves, I would bid you journey night-long, and run all risk rather than the risk of falling into their hands. But whereas I am your guide, I bid you kindle your fire under yonder big tree, and leave me to deal with the men of Utterbol; only whatso I bid you, that do ye straightway."

"So be it," said Ralph, "I have been bewrayed so oft of late, that I must needs trust thee, or all help shall fail me. Let us to work." So they fell to and built up a big bale and kindled it, and their horses they tethered to the tree; and by then they had done this, dark night had fallen upon them. So they cooked their victual at the fire (for Ralph had shot a hare by the way) and the Sage went down to the stream and fetched them water in a lethern budget: "For," said he, "I know the beasts of the wood and they me, and there is peace betwixt us." There then they sat to meat unarmed, for the Sage had said to them: "Doff your armour; ye shall not come to handystrokes with the Utterbol Riders."

So they ate their meat in the wilderness, and were nowise ungleeful, for to those twain the world seemed fair, and they hoped for great things. But though they were glad, they were weary enough, for the way had been both rugged and long; so they lay them down to sleep while the night was yet young. But or ever Ralph closed his eyes he saw the Sage standing up with his cloak wrapped about his head, and making strange signs with his right hand; so that he deemed that he would ward them by wizardry. So therewith he turned about on the grass and was asleep at once.

After a while he started and sat up, half awake at first; for he felt some one touch him; and his halfdreams went back to past days, and he cried out: "Hah Roger! is it thou? What is toward?" But therewith he woke up fully, and knew that it was the Sage that had touched him, and withal he saw hard by Ursula, sitting up also.

There was still a flickering flame playing about the red embers of their fire, for they had made it very big; and the moon had arisen and was shining bright in a cloudless sky.

The Sage spake softly but quickly: "Lie down together, ye two, and I shall cast my cloak over you, and look to it that ye stir not from out of it, nor speak on word till I bid you, whate'er may befall: for the riders of Utterbol are upon us."

They did as he bade them, but Ralph got somewhat of an eye-shot out of a corner of the cloak, and he could see that the Sage went and stood up against the tree-trunk holding a horse by the bridle, one on each side of him. Even therewith Ralph heard the clatter of horse-hoofs over the stones about the stream, and a man's voice cried out: "They will have heard us; so spur over the grass to the fire and the big tree: for then they cannot escape us." Then came the thump of horse-hoofs on the turf, and in half a minute they were amidst of a route of men a-horseback, more than a score, whose armour and weapons gleamed in the moonlight: yet when these riders were gotten there, they were silent, till one said in a quavering voice as if afeard: "Otter, Otter! what is this? A minute ago and we could see the fire, and the tree, and men and horses about them: and now, lo you! there is naught save two great grey stones lying on the grass, and a man's bare bones leaning up against the tree, and a ruckle of old horse-bones on either side of him. Where are we then?"

Then spake another; and Ralph knew the voice for Otter's: "I wot not, lord; naught else is changed save the fire and the horses and the men: yonder are the hills, yonder overhead is the moon, with the little light cloud dogging her; even that is scarce changed. Belike the fire was an earth-fire, and for the rest we saw wrong in the moonlight."

Spake the first man again, and his voice quavered yet more: "Nay nay, Otter, it is not so. Lo you the skeleton and the bones and the grey stones! And the fire, here this minute, there the next. O Otter, this is an evil place of an evil deed! Let us go seek elsewhere; let us depart, lest a worse thing befall us." And so with no more ado he turned his horse and smote his spurs into him and galloped off by the way he had come, and the others followed, nothing loth; only Otter tarried a little, and looked around him and laughed and said: "There goes my Lord's nephew; like my Lord he is not over bold, save in dealing with a shackled man. Well, for my part

if those others have sunk into the earth, or gone up into the air, they are welcome to their wizardry, and I am glad of it. For I know not how I should have done to have seen my mate that out-tilted me made a gelded wretch of; and it would have irked me to see that fair woman in the hands of the tormentors, though forsooth I have oft seen such sights. Well, it is good; but better were it to ride with my mate than serve the Devil and his Nephew."

Therewith he turned rein and galloped off after the others, and in a little while the sound of them had died off utterly into the night, and they heard but the voices of the wild things, and the wimbrel laughing from the hill-sides. Then came the Sage and drew the cloak from those two, and laughed on them and said: "Now may ye sleep soundly, when I have mended our fire; for ye will see no more of Utterbol for this time, and it yet lacks three hours of dawn: sleep ye then and dream of each other." Then they arose and thanked the Sage with whole hearts and praised his wisdom. But while the old man mended the fire Ralph went up to Ursula and took her hand, and said: "Welcome to life, fellow-farer!" and he gazed earnestly into her eyes, as though he would have her fall into his arms: but whereas she rather shrank from him, though she looked on him lovingly, if somewhat shyly, he but kissed her hand, and laid him down again, when he had seen her lying in her place. And therewith they fell asleep and slept sweetly.

CHAPTER 8

They Come to the Sea of Molten Rocks

When they woke again the sun was high above their heads, and they saw the Sage dighting their breakfast. So they arose and washed the night off them in the stream and ate hastily,

and got to horse on a fair forenoon; then they rode the mountain neck east from that valley; and it was a long slope of stony and barren mountain nigh waterless.

And on the way Ursula told Ralph how the man who was scared by the wizardry last night was verily the nephew of the Lord from whom she had stolen her armour by wheedling and a seeming promise. "But," said she, "his love lay not so deep but that he would have avenged him for my guile on my very body had he taken us." Ralph reddened and scowled at her word, and the Sage led them into the other talk.

So long was that fell, that they were nigh benighted ere they gained the topmost, or came to any pass. When they had come to a place where there was a little pool in a hollow of the rocks they made stay there, and slept safe, but ill-lodged, and on the morrow were on their way betimes, and went toiling up the neck another four hours, and came to a long rocky ridge or crest that ran athwart it: and when they had come to the brow thereof, then were they face to face with the Great Mountains, which now looked so huge that they seemed to fill all the world save the ground whereon they stood. Cloudless was the day, and the air clean and sweet, and every nook and cranny was clear to behold from where they stood: there were great jutting nesses with straight-walled burgs at their top-most, and pyramids and pinnacles that no hand of man had fashioned, and awful clefts like long streets in the city of the giants who wrought the world, and high above all the undying snow that looked as if the sky had come down on to the mountains and they were upholding it as a roof.

But clear as was the fashion of the mountains, they were yet a long way off: for betwixt them and the ridge whereon those fellows stood, stretched a vast plain, houseless and treeless, and, as they beheld it thence grey and ungrassed (though indeed it was not wholly so) like a huge river or firth of the sea it seemed, and such indeed it had been once, to wit a flood of molten rock in the old days when the earth was a-burning.

Now as they stood and beheld it, the Sage spake: "Lo ye, my children, the castle and its outwork, and its dyke that

wardeth the land of the Well at the World's End. Now from to-morrow, when we enter into the great sea of the rock molten in the ancient earth-fires, there is no least peril of pursuit for you. Yet amidst that sea should ye perish belike, were it not for the wisdom gathered by a few; and they are dead now save for the Book, and for me, who read it unto you. Now ye would not turn back were I to bid you, and I will not bid you. Yet since the journey shall be yet with grievous toil and much peril, and shall try the very hearts within you, were ye as wise as Solomon and as mighty as Alexander, I will say this much unto you; that if ye love not the earth and the world with all your souls, and will not strive all ye may to be frank and happy therein, your toil and peril aforesaid shall win you no blessing but a curse. Therefore I bid you be no tyrants or builders of cities for merchants and usurers and warriors and thralls, like the fool who builded Goldberg to be for a tomb to him: or like the thrall-masters of the Burg of the Four Friths, who even now, it may be, are pierced by their own staff or overwhelmed by their own wall. But rather I bid you to live in peace and patience without fear or hatred, and to succour the oppressed and love the lovely, and to be the friends of men, so that when ye are dead at last, men may say of you, they brought down Heaven to the Earth for a little while. What say ye, children?"

Then said Ralph: "Father, I will say the sooth about mine intent, though ye may deem it little-minded. When I have accomplished this quest, I would get me home again to the little land of Upmeads, to see my father and my mother, and to guard its meadows from waste and its houses from fire-raising: to hold war aloof and walk in free fields, and see my children growing up about me, and lie at last beside my fathers in the choir of St. Laurence. The dead would I love and remember; the living would I love and cherish; and Earth shall be the well beloved house of my Fathers, and Heaven the highest hall thereof."

"It is well," said the Sage, "all this shalt thou do and be no little-heart, though thou do no more. And thou, maiden?"

She looked on Ralph and said: "I lost, and then I found, and then I lost again. Maybe I shall find the lost once more. And for the rest, in all that this man will do, I will help, living or dead, for I know naught better to do."

"Again it is well," said the Sage, "and the lost which was verily thine shalt thou find again, and good days and their ending shall betide thee. Ye shall have no shame in your lives and no fear in your deaths. Wherefore now lieth the road free before you."

Then was he silent a while, neither spake the others aught, but stood gazing on the dark grey plain, and the blue wall that rose beyond it, till at last the Sage lifted up his hand and said: "Look yonder, children, to where I point, and ye shall see how there thrusteth out a ness from the mountain-wall, and the end of it stands like a bastion above the lava-sea, and on its sides and its head are streaks ruddy and tawny, where the earth-fires have burnt not so long ago: see ye?"

Ralph looked and said: "Yea, father, I see it, and its rifts and its ridges, and its crannies."

Quoth the Sage: "Behind that ness shall ye come to the Rock of the Fighting Man, which is the very Gate of the Mountains; and I will not turn again nor bid you farewell till I have brought you thither. And now time presses; for I would have you come timely to that cavern, whereof I have taught you, before ye fall on the first days of winter, or ye shall be hard bestead. So now we will eat a morsel, and then use diligence that we may reach the beginning of the rock-sea before nightfall."

So did they, and the Sage led them down by a slant-way from off the ridge, which was toilsome but nowise perilous. So about sunset they came down into the plain, and found a belt of greensward, and waters therein betwixt the foot of the ridge and the edge of the rock-sea. And as for the said sea, though from afar it looked plain and unbroken, now that they were close to, and on a level with it, they saw that it rose up into cliffs, broken down in some places, and in others arising high into the air, an hundred foot, it might be. Sometimes it thrust out into the green shore below the fell, and otherwhile drew back from it as it had cooled ages ago.

So they came to a place where there was a high wall of rock round three sides of a grassy place by a stream-side, and there they made their resting-place, and the night went calmly and sweetly with them.

CHAPTER 9

They Come Forth From the Rock-Sea

On the morrow the Sage led them straight into the rock-sea whereas it seemed to them at first that he was but bringing them into a blind alley; but at the end of the bight the rock-wall was broken down into a long scree of black stones. There the Sage bade Ralph and Ursula dismount (as for him he had been going afoot ever since that first day) and they led the horses up the said scree, which was a hard business, as they were no mountain beasts. And when they were atop of the scree it was harder yet to get them down, for on that side it was steeper; but at last they brought it about, and came down into a little grassy plain or isle in the rock sea, which narrowed toward the eastern end, and the rocks on either side were smooth and glossy, as if the heat had gone out of them suddenly, when the earth-fires had ceased in the mountains.

Now the Sage showed them on a certain rock a sign cut, whereof they had learned in the book aforesaid, to wit, a sword crossed by a three-leaved bough; and they knew by the book that they should press on through the rock-sea nowhere, either going or returning, save where they should see this token.

Now when they came to the narrow end of the plain they found still a wide way between the rock-walls, that whiles widened out, and whiles drew in again. Whiles withal were screes across the path, and little waters that ran out of the

lava and into it again, and great blocks of fallen stone, sometimes as big as a husbandman's cot, that wind and weather had rent from the rocks; and all these things stayed them somewhat. But they went on merrily, albeit their road winded so much, that the Sage told them, when evening was, that for their diligence they had but come a few short miles as the crow flies.

Many wild things there were, both beast and fowl, in these islands and bridges of the rock-sea, hares and conies to wit, a many, and heathfowl, and here and there a red fox lurking about the crannies of the rock-wall. Ralph shot a brace of conies with his Turk bow, and whereas there were bushes growing in the chinks, and no lack of whin and ling, they had firing enough, and supped off this venison of the rocks.

So passed that day and two days more, and naught befell, save that on the midnight of the first day of their wending the rock-sea, Ralph awoke and saw the sky all ablaze with other light than that of the moon; so he arose and went hastily to the Sage, and took him by the shoulder, and bid him awake; "For meseems the sky is afire, and perchance the foe is upon us."

The Sage awoke and opened his eyes, and rose on his elbow and looked around sleepily; then he said laughing: "It is naught, fair lord, thou mayst lie down and sleep out the remnant of the night, and thou also, maiden: this is but an earth-fire breaking out on the flank of the mountains; it may be far away hence. Now ye see that he may not scale the rocks about us here without toil; but to-morrow night we may climb up somewhere and look on what is toward."

So Ralph lay down and Ursula also, but Ralph lay long awake watching the light above him, which grew fiercer and redder in the hours betwixt moonset and daybreak, when he fell asleep, and woke not again till the sun was high.

But on the next day as they went, the aspect of the rock-sea about them changed: for the rocks were not so smooth and shining and orderly, but rose up in confused heaps all clotted together by the burning, like to clinkers out of some monstrous forge of the earth-giants, so that their way was naught so clear as it had been, but was rather a

maze of jagged stone. But the Sage led through it all unfumbling, and moreover now and again they came on that carven token of the sword and the bough. Night fell, and as it grew dark they saw the glaring of the earth-fires again; and when they were rested, and had done their meat, the Sage said: "Come now with me, for hard by is there a place as it were a stair that goeth to the top of a great rock, let us climb it and look about us."

So did they, and the head of the rock was higher than the main face of the rock-sea, so that they could see afar. Thence they looked north and beheld afar off a very pillar of fire rising up from a ness of the mountain wall, and seeming as if it bore up a black roof of smoke; and the huge wall gleamed grey, because of its light, and it cast a ray of light across the rock-sea as the moon doth over the waters of the deep: withal there was the noise as of thunder in the air, but afar off: which thunder indeed they had heard oft, as they rode through the afternoon and evening.

Spake the Sage: "It is far away: yet if the wind were not blowing from us, we had smelt the smoke, and the sky had been darkened by it. Now it is naught so far from Utterbol, and it will be for a token to them there. For that ness is called the Candle of the Giants, and men deem that the kindling thereof forebodeth ill to the lord who sitteth on the throne in the red hall of Utterbol."

Ralph laid his hand on Ursula's shoulder and said: "May the Sage's saw be sooth!"

She put her hand upon the hand and said: "Three months ago I lay on my bed at Bourton Abbas, and all the while here was this huge manless waste lying under the bare heavens and threatened by the storehouse of the fires of the earth: and I had not seen it, nor thee either, O friend; and now it hath become a part of me for ever."

Then was Ralph exceeding glad of her words, and the Sage laughed inwardly when he beheld them thus.

So they came adown from the rock and lay down presently under the fiery heavens: and their souls were comforted by the sound of the horses cropping the grass so close to their ears, that it broke the voice of the earth-fires' thunder, that

ever and anon rolled over the grey sea amidst which they lay.

On the morrow they still rode the lava like to clinkers, and it rose higher about them, till suddenly nigh sunset it ended at a turn of their winding road, and naught lay betwixt them and that mighty ness of the mountains, save a wide grassy plain, here and there swelling into low wide risings not to be called hills, and besprinkled with copses of bushes, and with trees neither great nor high. Then spake the Sage: "Here now will we rest, and by my will to-morrow also, that your beasts may graze their fill of the sweet grass of these unwarded meadows, which feedeth many a herd unowned of man, albeit they pay a quit-rent to wild things that be mightier than they. And now, children, we have passed over the mighty river that once ran molten betwixt these mountains and the hills yonder to the west, which we trod the other day; yet once more, if your hearts fail you, there is yet time to turn back; and no harm shall befall you, but I will be your fellow all the way home to Swevenham if ye will. But if ye still crave the water of the Well at the World's End, I will lead you over this green plain, and then go back home to mine hermitage, and abide there till ye come to me, or I die."

Ralph smiled and said: "Master, no such sorry story shall I bear back to Upmeads, that after many sorrows borne, and perils overcome, I came to the Gates of the Mountains, and turned back for fear of that which I had not proved."

So spake he; but Ursula laughed and said: "Yea, then should I deem thy friendship light if thou leftest me alone and upholpen in the uttermost wilderness; and thy manhood light to turn back from that which did not make a woman afraid."

Then the Sage looked kindly on them and said: "Yea, then is the last word spoken, and the world may yet grow merrier to me. Look you, some there be who may abuse the gifts of the Well for evil errands, and some who may use it for good deeds; but I am one who hath not dared to use it lest I should abuse it, I being along amongst weaklings and fools: but now if ye come back, who knows but that I may fear no

longer, but use my life, and grow to be a mighty man. Come now, let us dight our supper, and kindle as big a fire as we lightly may; since there is many a prowling beast about, as bear and lynx and lion; for they haunt this edge of the rock-sea whereto the harts and the wild bulls and the goats resort for the sweet grass, and the water that floweth forth from the lava."

So they cut good store of firing, whereas there was a plenty of bushes growing in the clefts of the rocks, and they made a big fire and tethered their horses anigh it when they lay down to rest; and in the night they heard the roaring of wild things round about them, and more than once or twice, awakening before day, they saw the shape of some terrible creature by the light of the moon mingled with the glare of the earth-fires, but none of these meddled with them, and naught befell them save the coming of the new day.

CHAPTER 10

They Come to the Gate of the Mountains

That day they herded their horses thereabout, and from time to time the Sage tried those two if they were perfect in the lore of the road; and he found that they had missed nothing.

They lay down in the self-same place again that night, and arose betimes on the morrow and went their ways over the plain as the Sage led, till it was as if the mountains and their terror hung over their very heads, and the hugeness and blackness of them were worse than a wall of fire had been. It was still a long way to them, so that it was not till noon of the third day from the rock-sea that they came to the very feet of that fire-scorched ness, and wonderful indeed it

seemed to them that anything save the eagles could have aught to tell of what lay beyond it.

There were no foothills or downs betwixt the plain and the mountains, naught save a tumble of rocks that had fallen from the cliffs, piled up strangely, and making a maze through which the Sage led them surely; and at last they were clear even of this, and were underneath the flank of that ness, which was so huge that themseemed that there could scarce be any more mountain that that. Little of its huge height could they see, now they were close to it, for it went up sheer at first and then beetled over them till they could see no more of its side; as they wound about its flank, and they were long about it, the Sage cried out to those two and stretched out his hand, and behold! the side of the black cliff plain and smooth and shining as if it had been done by the hand of men or giants, and on this smooth space was carven in the living rock the image of a warrior in mail and helm of ancient fashion, and holding a sword in his right hand. From head to heel he seemed some sixty feet high, and the rock was so hard, that he was all clean and clear to see; and the deemed of him that his face was keen and stern of aspect.

So there they stood in an awful bight of the mountain, made by that ness, and the main wall from which it thrust out. But after they had gazed awhile and their hearts were in their mouths, the Sage turned on those twain and said: "Here then is the end of my journey with you; and ye wot all that I can tell you, and I can say no word more save to bid you cast all fear aside and thrive. Ye have yet for this day's journey certain hours of such daylight as the mountain pass will give you, which at the best is little better than twilight; therefore redeem ye the time."

But Ralph got off his horse, and Ursula did in likewise, and they both kissed and embraced the old man, for their hearts were full and fain. But he drew himself away from them, and turned about with no word more, and went his ways, and presently was hidden from their eyes by the rocky maze which lay about the mountain's foot. Then the twain

mounted their horses again and set forth silently on the road, as they had been bidden.

In a little while the rocks of the pass closed about them, leaving but a way so narrow that they could see a glimmer of the stars above them as they rode the twilight; no sight they had of the measureless stony desert, yet in their hearts they saw it. They seemed to be wending a straight-walled prison without an end, so that they were glad when the dark night came on them.

Ralph found some shelter in the cleft of a rock above a mound where was little grass for the horses. He drew Ursula into it, and they sat down there on the stones together. So long they sat silent that a great gloom settled upon Ralph, and he scarce knew whether he were asleep or waking, alive or dead. But amidst of it fell a sweet voice on his ears, and familiar words asking him of what like were the fields of Upmeads, and the flowers; and of the fish of its water, and of the fashion of the building of his father's house; and of his brethren, and the mother that bore him. Then was it to him at first as if a sweet dream had come across the void of his gloom, and then at last the gloom and the dread and the deadness left him, and he knew that his friend and fellow was talking to him, and that he sat by her knee to knee, and the sweetness of her savoured in his nostrils as she leaned her face toward him, and he knew himself for what he was; and yet for memory of that past horror, and the sweetness of his friend and what not else, he fell a-weeping. But Ursula bestirred herself and brought out food from her wallet, and sat down beside him again, and he wiped the tears from his eyes and laughed, and chid himself for being as a child in the dark, and then they ate and drank together in that dusk nook of the wilderness. And now was he happy and his tongue was loosed, and he fell to telling her many things of Upmeads, and of the tale of his forefathers, and of his old loves and his friends, till life and death seemed to him as they had seemed of time past in the merry land of his birth. So there anon they fell asleep for weariness, and no dreams of terror beset their slumbers.

CHAPTER 11

They Come to the Vale of Sweet Chestnuts

When they went on their way next morning they found little change in the pass, and they rode the dread highway daylong, and it was still the same: so they rested a little before nightfall at a place where there was water running out of the rocks, but naught else for their avail. Ralph was merry and helpful and filled water from the runnel, and wrought what he might to make the lodging meet; and as they ate and rested he said to Ursula: "Last night it was thou that beguiled me of my gloom, yet thereafter till we slept it was my voice for the more part, and not thine, that was heard in the wilderness. Now to-night it shall be otherwise, and I will but ask a question of thee, and hearken to the sweetness of thy voice."

She laughed a little and very sweetly, and she said: "Forsooth, dear friend, I spoke to thee that I might hear they voice for the more part, and not thine, that was heard in the desert; but when I heard thee, I deemed that the world was yet alive for us to come back to."

He was silent awhile, for his heart was pierced with the sweetness of her speech, and he had fain have spoken back as sweetly as a man might; yet he could not because he feared her somewhat, lest she should turn cold to him; therefore himseemed that he spoke roughly, as he said: "Nevertheless, my friend, I beseech thee to tell me of thine old home, even as last night I told thee of mine."

"Yea," she said, "with a good will." And straightway she fell to telling him of her ways when she was little, and of her father and mother, and of her sister that had died, and the brother whom Ralph had seen at Bourton Abbas: she told

also of bachelors who had wooed her, and jested concerning them, yet kindly and without malice, and talked so sweetly and plainly, that the wilderness was become a familiar place to Ralph, and he took her hand in the dusk and said: "But, my friend, how was it with the man for whom thou wert weeping when I first fell in with thee at Bourton Abbas?"

She said: "I will tell thee plainly, as a friend may to a friend. Three hours had not worn from thy departure ere tidings came to me concerning him, that neither death nor wounding had befallen him; and that his masterless horse and bloodstained saddle were but a device to throw dust into our eyes, so that there might be no chase after him by the men of the Abbot's bailiff, and that he might lightly do as he would, to wit, swear himself into the riders of the Burg of the Four Friths; for, in sooth, he was weary of me and mine. Yet further, I must needs tell thee that I know now, that when I wept before thee it was partly in despite, because I had found out in my heart (though I bade it not tell me so much) that I loved him but little."

"Yea," said Ralph, "and when didst thou come to that knowledge of thine heart?"

"Dear friend," she said, "mayhappen I may tell thee hereafter, but as now I will forbear." He laughed for joy of her, and in a little that talk fell down between them.

Despite the terror of the desert and the lonely ways, when Ralph laid him down on his stony bed, happiness wrapped his heart about. Albeit all this while he durst not kiss or caress her, save very measurely, for he deemed that she would not suffer it; nor as yet would he ask her wherefore, though he had it in his mind that he would not always forbear to ask her.

Many days they rode that pass of the mountains, though it was not always so evil and dreadful as at the first beginning; for now again the pass opened out into little valleys, wherein was foison of grass and sweet waters withal, and a few trees. In such places must they needs rest them, to refresh their horses as well as themselves, and to gather food, of venison, and wild-fruit and nuts. But abiding in such vales was very pleasant to them.

At last these said valleys came often and oftener, till it was so that all was pretty much one valley, whiles broken by a mountain neck, whiles straitened by a ness of the mountains that jutted into it, but never quite blind: yet was the said valley very high up, and as it were a trench of the great mountain. So they were glad that they had escaped from that strait prison betwixt the rock-walls, and were well at ease: and they failed never to find the tokens that led them on the way, even as they had learned of the Sage, so that they were not beguiled into any straying.

And now they had worn away thirty days since they had parted from the Sage, and the days began to shorten and the nights to lengthen apace; when on the forenoon of a day, after they had ridden a very rugged mountain-neck, they came down and down into a much wider valley into which a great reef of rocks thrust out from the high mountain, so that the northern half of the said vale was nigh cleft atwain by it; well grassed was the vale, and a fair river ran through it, and there were on either side the water great groves of tall and great sweet-chestnuts and walnut trees, whereon the nuts were now ripe. They rejoiced as they rode into it; for they remembered how the Sage had told them thereof, that their travel and toil should be stayed there awhile, and that there they should winter, because of the bread which they could make them of the chestnuts, and the plenty of walnuts, and that withal there was foison of vension.

So they found a ford of the river and crossed it, and went straight to the head of the rocky ness, being shown thither by the lore of the Sage, and they found in the face of the rock the mouth of a cavern, and beside it the token of the sword and the branch. Therefore they knew that they had come to their winter house, and they rejoiced thereat, and without more ado they got off their horses and went into the cavern. The entry thereof was low, so that they must needs creep into it, but within it was a rock-hall, high, clean and sweet-smelling.

There then they dight their dwelling, doing all they might to be done with their work before the winter was upon them. The day after they had come there they fell to on the in-

gathering of their chestnut harvest, and they dried them, and made them into meal; and the walnuts they gathered also. Withal they hunted the deer, both great and small; amongst which Ralph, not without some peril, slew two great bears, of which beasts, indeed, there was somewhat more than enough, as they came into the dale to feed upon the nuts and the berry-trees. So they soon had good store of peltries for their beds and their winter raiment, which Ursula fell to work on deftly, for she knew all the craft of needlework; and, shortly to tell it, they had enough and to spare of victual and raiment.

CHAPTER 12
Winter Amidst of the Mountains

In all this they had enough to be busy with, so that time hung not heavy on their hands, and the shadow of the Quest was nowise burdensome to them, since they wotted that they had to abide the wearing of the days till spring was come with fresh tidings. Their labour was nowise irksome to them, since Ralph was deft in all manner of sports and crafts, such as up-country folk follow, and though he were a king's son, he had made a doughty yeoman: and as for Ursula, she also was country-bred, of a lineage of field-folk, and knew all the manners of the fields.

Withal in whatsoever way it were, they loved each other dearly, and all kind of speech flowed freely betwixt them. Sooth to say, Ralph, taking heed of Ursula, deemed that she were fain to love him bodily, and he wotted well by now, that, whatever had befallen, he loved her, body and soul. Yet still was that fear of her naysay lurking in his heart, if he should kiss her, or caress her, as a man with a maid. There-

fore he forbore, though desire of her tormented him grievously at whiles.

They wore their armour but little now, save when they were about some journey wherein was peril of wild beasts. Ursula had dight her some due woman's raiment betwixt her knight's surcoat and doe-skins which they had gotten, so that it was not unseemly of fashion. As for their horses, they but seldom backed them, but used them to draw stuff to their rock-house on sledges, which they made of tree-boughs; so that the beasts grew fat, feeding on the grass of the valley and the wild-oats withal, which grew at the upper end of the bight of the valley, toward the northern mountains, where the ground was sandy. No man they saw, nor any signs of man, no had they seen any save the Sage, since those riders of Utterbol had vanished before them into the night.

So wore autumn into winter, and the frost came, and the snow, with prodigious winds from out of the mountains: yet was not the weather so hard but that they might go forth most days, and come to no hurt if they were wary of the drifts; and forsooth needs must they go abroad to take venison for their livelihood.

So the winter wore also amidst sweet speech and friendliness betwixt the two, and they lived still as dear friends, and not as lovers.

Seldom they spoke of the Quest, for it seemed to them now a matter over great for speech. But now they were grown so familiar each to each that Ursula took heart to tell Ralph more of the tidings of Utterbol, for now the shame and grief of her bondage there was but as a story told of another, so far away seemed that time from this. But so grievous was her tale that Ralph grew grim thereover, and he said: "By St. Nicholas! it were a good deed, once we are past the mountains again, to ride to Utterbol and drag that swine and wittol from his hall and slay him, and give his folk a good day. But then there is thou, my friend, and how shall I draw thee into deadly strife?"

"Nay," she said, "whereso thou ridest thither will I, and one fate shall lie on us both. We will think thereof and ask the Sage of it when we return. Who knows what shall have

befallen then? Remember the lighting of the candle of Utterbol that we saw from the Rock-sea, and the boding thereof." So Ralph was appeased for that time.

Oft also they spake of the little lands whence they came, and on a time amidst of such talk Ursula said: "But alas, friend, why do I speak of all this, when now save for my brother, who loveth me but after a fashion, to wit that I must in all wise do his bidding, lad as he is, I have no longer kith nor kin there, save again as all the folk of one stead are somewhat akin. I think, my dear, that I have no country, nor any house to welcome me."

Said Ralph: "All lands, any land that thou mayst come to, shall welcome thee, and I shall look to it that so it shall be." And in his heart he thought of the welcome of Upmeads, and of Ursula sitting on the dais of the hall of the High-House.

So wore the days till Candlemass, when the frost broke and the snows began to melt, and the waters came down from the mountains, so that the river rose over its banks and its waters covered the plain parts of the valley, and those two could go dryshod but a little way out of their cavern; no further than the green mound or toft which lay at the mouth thereof: but the waters were thronged with fowl, as mallard and teal and coots, and of these they took what they would. Whiles also they waded the shallows of the flood, and whiles poled a raft about it, and so had pleasure of the waters as before they had had of the snow. But when at last the very spring was come, and the grass began to grow after the showers had washed the plain of the waterborne mud, and the snowdrop had thrust up and blossomed, and the celandine had come, and then when the blackthorn bloomed and the Lent-lilies hid the grass betwixt the great chestnut-boles, when the sun shone betwixt the showers and the west wind blew, and the throstles and blackbirds ceased not their song betwixt dawn and dusk, then began Ralph to say to himself, that even if the Well at the World's End were not, and all that the Sage had told them was but a tale of Swevenham, yet were all better than well if Ursula were but to him a woman beloved rather than a friend. And whiles he was pensive and silent, even when she was by him, and she noted

it and forbore somewhat the sweetness of her glances, and the caressing of her soft speech: though oft when he looked on her fondly, the blood would rise to her cheeks, and her bosom would heave with the thought of his desire, which quickened hers so sorely, that it became a pain and grief to her.

CHAPTER 13

Of Ursula and the Bear

It befell on a fair sunny morning of spring, that Ralph sat alone on the toft by the rock-house, for Ursula had gone down the meadow to disport her and to bathe in the river. Ralph was fitting the blade of a dagger to a long ashen shaft, to make him a strong spear; for with the waxing spring the bears were often in the meadows again; and the day before they had come across a family of the beasts in the sandy bight under the mountains; to wit a carle, and a quean with her cubs; the beasts had seen them but afar off, and whereas the men were two and the sun shone back from their weapons, they had forborne them; although they were fierce and proud in those wastes, and could not away with creatures that were not of their kind. So because of this Ralph had bidden Ursula not to fare abroad without her sword, which was sharp and strong, and she no weakling withal. He bethought him of this just as he had made an end of his spear-shaping, so therewith he looked aside and saw the said sword hanging to a bough of a little quicken-tree, which grew hard by the door. Fear came into his heart therewith, so he arose and strode down over the meadow hastily bearing his new spear, and girt with his sword. Now there was a grove of chestnuts betwixt him and the river, but on the other side of them naught but the green grass down to the water's edge.

Sure enough as he came under the trees he heard a shrill cry, and knew that it could be naught save Ursula; so he ran thitherward whence came the cry, shouting as he ran, and was scarce come out of the trees ere he saw Ursula indeed, mother-naked, held in chase by a huge bear as big as a bullock: he shouted again and ran the faster; but even therewith, whether she heard and saw him, and hoped for timely help, or whether she felt her legs failing her, she turned on the bear, and Ralph saw that she had a little axe in her hand wherewith she smote hardily at the beast; but he, after the fashion of his kind, having risen to his hind legs, fenced with his great paws like a boxer, and smote the axe out of her hand, and she cried out bitterly and swerved from him and fell a running again; but the bear tarried not, and would have caught her in a few turns; but even therewith was Ralph come up, who thrust the beast into the side with his long-headed spear, and not waiting to pull it out again, drew sword in a twinkling, and smote a fore-paw off him and then drave the sword in over the shoulder so happily that it reached his heart, and he fell over dead with a mighty thump.

Then Ralph looked around for Ursula; but she had already run back to the river-side and was casting her raiment on her; so he awaited her beside the slain bear, but with drawn sword, lest the other bear should come upon them; for this was the he-bear. Howbeit he saw naught save presently Ursula all clad and coming towards him speedily; so he turned toward her, and when they met he cast himself upon her without a word, and kissed her greedily; and she forbore not at all, but kissed and caressed him as if she could never be satisfied.

So at last they drew apart a little, and walked quietly toward the rock-house hand in hand. And on the way she told him that even as she came up on to the bank from the water she saw the bear coming down on her as fast as he could drive, and so she but caught up her axe, and ran for it: "Yet I had little hope, dear friend," she said, "but that thou shouldst be left alone in the wilderness." And therewith she turned on him and cast her arms about him again, all weeping for joy of their two lives.

Thus slowly they came before the door of their rock-house

and Ralph said: "Let us sit down here on the grass, and if thou art not over wearied with the flight and the battle, I will ask thee a question." She laid herself down on the grass with a sigh, yet it was as of one who sighs for pleasure and rest, and said, as he sat down beside her: "I am fain to rest my limbs and my body, but my heart is at rest; so ask on, dear friend."

The song of birds was all around them, and the scent of many blossoms went past on the wings of the west wind, and Ralph was silent a little as he looked at the loveliness of his friend; then he said: "This is the question; of what kind are thy kisses this morning, are they the kisses of a friend or a lover? Wilt thou not called me beloved and not friend? Shall not we two lie on the bridal bed this same night?"

She looked on him steadily, smiling, but for love and sweetness, not for shame and folly; then she said: "O, dear friend and dearest lover, three questions are these and not one; but I will answer all three as my heart biddeth me. And first, I will tell thee that my kisses are as thine; and if thine are aught but the kisses of love, then am I befooled. And next, I say that if thou wilt be my friend indeed, I will not spare to call thee beloved, or to be all thy friend. But as to thy third question; tell me, is there not time enough for that?"

She faltered as she spake, but he said: "Look, beloved, and see how fair the earth is to-day! What place and what season can be goodlier than this? And were it not well that we who love each other should have our full joy out of this sweet season, which as now is somewhat marred by our desire?"

"Ah, beloved!" she said, looking shyly at him, "is it so marred by that which marreth not us?"

"Hearken!" he said; "how much longer shall this fairness and peace, and our leisure and safety endure? Here and now the earth rejoiceth about us, and there is none to say us nay; but to-morrow it may all be otherwise. Bethink thee, dear, if but an hour ago the monster had slain thee, and rent thee ere we had lain in each other's arms!"

"Alas!" she said, "and had I lain in thine arms an hundred times, or an hundred times an hundred, should not the world be barren to me, wert thou gone from it, and that could

never more be? But thou friend, thou well-beloved, fain were I to do thy will that thou mightest be the happier . . . and I withal. And if thou command it, be it so! Yet now should I tell thee all my thought, and it is on my mind, that for a many hundreds of years, yea, while our people were yet heathen, when a man should wed a maid all the folk knew of it, and were witnesses of the day and the hour thereof: now thou knowest that the time draws nigh when we may look for those messengers of the Innocent Folk, who come every spring to this cave to see if there be any whom they may speed on the way to the Well at the World's End. Therefore if thou wilt (and not otherwise) I would abide their coming if it be not over long delayed; so that there may be others to witness our wedding besides God, and those his creatures who dwell in the wilderness. Yet shall all be as thou wilt."

"How shall I not do after thy bidding?" said Ralph. "I will abide their coming: yet would that they were here to-day! And one thing I will pray of thee, that because of them thou wilt not forbear, or cause me to forbear, such kissing and caressing as is meet betwixt troth-plight lovers."

She laughed and said: "Nay, why should I torment thee . . . or me? We will not tarry for this." And therewith she took her arm about his neck and kissed him oft.

Then they said naught awhile, but sat listening happily to the song of the pairing birds. At last Ralph said: "What was it, beloved, that thou wert perchance to tell me concerning the thing that caused thine heart to see that thy betrothed, for whom thou wepst or seemedst to weep at the ale-house at Bourton Abbas, was of no avail to thee?"

She said: "It was the sight of thee; and I thought also how I might never be thine. For that I have sorrowed many a time since."

Said Ralph: "I am young and unmighty, yet lo! I heal thy sorrow as if I were an exceeding mighty man. And now I tell thee that I am minded to go back with thee to Upmeads straightway; for love will prevail."

"Nay," she said, "that word is but from the teeth outwards; for thou knowest, as I do, that the perils of the

homeward road shall overcome us, despite of love, if we have not drunk of the Well at the World's End."

Again they were silent awhile, but anon she arose to her feet and said: "Now must I needs dight victual for us twain; but first" (and she smiled on him withal), "how is it that thou hast not asked me if the beast did me any hurt? Art thou grown careless of me, now the wedding is so nigh?"

He said: "Nay, but could I not see thee that thou wert not hurt? There was no mark of blood upon thee, nor any stain at all." Then she reddened, and said: "Ah, I forgot how keen-eyes thou art." And she stood silent a little while, as he looked on her and loved her sweetness. Then he said: "I am exceeding full of joy, but my body is uneasy; so I will now go and skin that troll who went so nigh to slay thee, and break up the carcase, if thou wilt promise to abide about the door of the house, and have thy sword and the spear ready to hand, and to don thine helm and hauberk to boot."

She laughed and said: "That were but strange attire for a cook-maid, Ralph, my friend; yet shall I do thy will, my lord and my love."

Then went Ralph into the cave, and brought forth the armour and did it on her, and kissed her, and so went his ways to the carcase of the bear, which lay some two furlongs from their dwelling; and when he came to the quarry he fell to work, and was some time about it, so huge as the beast was. Then he hung the skin and the carcase on a tree of the grove, and went down to the river and washed him, and then went lightly homewards.

CHAPTER 14

Now Come the Messengers of the Innocent Folk

But when he had come forth from the chestnut-grove, and could see the face of their house-rock clearly, he beheld new tidings; for there were folk before the door of the dwelling, and Ursula was standing amidst of them, for he could see the gleam of her armour; and with the men he could see also certain beasts of burden, and anon that these were oxen. So he hastened on to find what this might mean, and drew his sword as he went. But when he came up to the rock, he found there two young men and an elder, and they had with them five oxen, three for riding, and two sumpter beasts, laden: and Ursula and these men were talking together friendly; so that Ralph deemed that the new-comers must be the messengers of the Innocent Folk. They were goodly men all three, somewhat brown of skin, but well fashioned, and of smiling cheerful countenance, well knit, and tall. The elder had a long white beard, but his eye was bright, and his hand firm and smooth. They were all clad in white woollen raiment, and bore no armour, but each had an axe with a green stone blade, curiously tied to the heft, and each of the young men carried a strong bow and a quiver of arrows.

Ralph greeted the men, and bade them sit down on the toft and eat a morsel; they took his greeting kindly, and sat down, while Ursula went into the cave to fetch them matters for their victual, and there was already venison roasting at the fire on the toft, in the place where they were wont to cook their meat. So then came Ursula forth from the cave, and served the new-comers and Ralph of such things as she had, and they ate and drank together; and none said aught of their errand till they had done their meat, but they talked

together pleasantly about the spring, and the blossoms of the plain and the mountain, and the wild things that dwelt thereabout.

But when the meal was over, the new-comers rose to their feet, and bowed before Ralph and Ursula, and the elder took up the word and said: "Ye fair people, have ye any errand in the wilderness, or are ye chance-comers who have strayed thus far, and know not how to return?"

"Father," said Ralph, "we have come a long way on an errand of life or death; for we seek the WELL at the WORLD'S END. And see ye the token thereof, the pair of beads which we bear, either of us, and the fashion whereof ye know."

Then the elder bowed to them again, and said: "It is well; then is this our errand with you, to be your way-leaders as far as the House of the Sorceress, where ye shall have other help. Will ye set out on the journey to-day? In one hour shall we be ready."

"Nay," said Ralph, "we will not depart till tomorrow morn, if it may be so. Therewith I bid you sit down and rest you, while ye hearken a word which I have to say to you."

So they sat down again, and Ralph arose and took Ursula by the hand, and stood with her before the elder, and said: "This maiden, who is my fellow-farer in the Quest, I desire to wed this same night, and she also desireth me: therefore I would have you as witnesses hereto. But first ye shall tell us if our wedding and the knowing each other carnally shall be to our hurt in the Quest; for if that be so, then shall we bridle our desires and perform our Quest in their despite."

The old man smiled upon them kindly, and said: "Nay, son, we hear not that it shall be the worse for you in any wise that ye shall become one flesh; and right joyful it is to us, not only that we have found folk who seek to the Well at the World's End, but also that there is such love as I perceive there is betwixt such goodly and holy folk as ye be. For hither we come year by year according to the behest that we made to the fairest woman of the world, when she came back to us from the Well at the World's End, and it is many and many a year ago since we found any seekers after the

Well dwelling here. Therefore have we the more joy in you. And we have brought hither matters good for you, as raiment, and meal, and wine, on our sumpter-beasts; therefore as ye have feasted us this morning, so shall we feast you this even. And if ye will, we shall build for you in the grove yonder such a bower as we build for our own folk on the night of the wedding."

Ralph yeasaid this, and thanked them. So then the elder cried: "Up, my sons, and show your deftness to these dear friends!" Then the young men arose, naught loth, and when they had hoppled their oxen and taken the burdens from off them, they all went down the meadow together into the chestnut grove, and they fell to and cut willow boughs, and such-like wood, and drave stakes and wove the twigs together; and Ralph and Ursula worked with them as they bade, and they were all very merry together: because for those two wanderers it was a great delight to see the faces of the children of men once more after so many months, and to hold converse with them; while for their part the young men marvelled at Ursula's beauty, and the pith and goodliness of Ralph.

By then it was nigh evening they had made a very goodly wattled bower, and roofed it with the skins that were in the cave, and hung it about with garlands, and strewn flowers on the floor thereof. And when all was done they went back to the toft before the rock-chamber, where the elder had opened the loads, and had taken meal thence, and was making cakes at the fire. And there was wine there in well-hooped kegs, and wooden cups fairly carven, and raiment of fine white wool for those twain, broidered in strange but beauteous fashion with the feathers of bright-hued birds.

So then were those twain arrayed for the bridal; and the meat was dight and the cups filled, and they sat down on the grassy toft a little before sunset, and feasted till the night was come, and was grown all light with the moon; and then Ralph rose up, and took Ursula's hand, and they stood before the elder, and bade him and the young men bear witness that

they were wedded: then those twain kissed the newcomers and departed to their bridal bower hand in hand through the freshness of the night.

CHAPTER 15

They Come to the Land of the Innocent Folk

When it was morning they speedily gat them ready for the road, whereas they had little to take with them; so they departed joyously, howbeit both Ralph and Ursula felt rather love than loathing for their winter abode. The day was yet young when they went their ways. Their horses and all their gear were a great wonder to the young men, for they had seen no such beasts before: but the elder said that once in his young days he had led a man to the Well who was riding a horse and was clad in knightly array.

So they went by ways which were nowise dreadful, though they were void of men-folk, and in three days' time they were come out of the mountains, and in three more the said mountains were to behold but a cloud behind them, and the land was grown goodly, with fair valleys and little hills, though still they saw no men, and forsooth they went leisurely, for oxen are but slow-going nags. But when they were gone eight days from the Valley of Sweet-chestnuts, they came across a flock of uncouth-looking sheep on a green hill-side, and four folk shepherding them, two carles to wit, and two quéans, like to their way-leaders, but scarce so goodly, and ruder of raiment. These men greeted them kindly, and yet with more worship than fellowship, and they marvelled exceedingly at their horses and weapons. Thence they passed on, and the next day came into a wide valley, well-grassed and watered, and wooded here and there; moreover there were cots scattered about it. There and thence-

forth they met men a many, both carles and queans, and sheep and neat in plenty, and they passed by garths wherein the young corn was waxing, and vineyards on the hillsides, where the vines were beginning to grow green. The land seemed as goodly as might be, and all the folk they met were kind, if somewhat over reverent.

On the evening of that day they came into the town of that folk, which was but simple, wholly unfenced for war, and the houses but low, and not great. Yet was there naught of filth or famine, nor any poverty or misery; and the people were merry-faced and well-liking, and clad goodly after their fashion in white woollen cloth or frieze. All the people of the town were come forth to meet them, for runners had gone before them, and they stood on either side of the way murmuring greetings, and with their heads bent low in reverence.

Thus rode Ralph and Ursula up to the door of the Temple, or Mote-house, or Guest-house, for it was all these, a house great, and as fair as they knew how to make it. Before the door thereof were standing the elders of the Folk; and when they drew rein, the eldest and most reverend of these came forth and spake in a cheerful voice, yet solemnly: "Welcome and thrice welcome to the Seekers after length of days and happy times, and the loving-kindness of the Folks of the Earth!"

Then all the elders gathered about them, and bade them light down and be at rest amongst them, and they made much of them and brought them into the Mote-house, wherein were both women and men fair and stately, and the men took Ralph by the hand and the women Ursula, and brought them into chambers where they bathed them and did off their wayfaring raiment, and clad them in white woollen gowns of web exceeding fine, and fragrant withal. Then they crowned them with flowers, and led them back into the hall, whereas now was much folk gathered, and they set them down on a dais as though they had been kings, or rather gods; and when they beheld them there so fair and lovely, they cried out for joy of them, and bade them hail oft and oft.

There then were they feasted by that kind folk, and when

meat was done certain youths and maidens fell to singing songs very sweetly; and the words of the songs were simple and harmless, and concerning the fairness of the earth and the happy loves of the creatures that dwell therein.

Thereafter as the night aged, they were shown to a sleeping chamber, which albeit not richly decked, or plenished with precious things, was most dainty clean, and sweet smelling, and strewn with flowers, so that the night was sweet to them in a chamber of love.

CHAPTER 16
They Come to the House of the Sorceress

On the morrow the kind people delayed them little, though they sorrowed for their departure, and before noon were their old way-leaders ready for them; and the old man and his two grandsons (for such they were) were much honoured of the simple people for their way-leading of the Heavenly Folk; for so they called Ralph and Ursula. So they gat them to the way in suchlike guise as before, only they had with them five sumpter oxen instead of two; for the old man told them that not only was their way longer, but also they must needs pass through a terrible waste, wherein was naught for their avail, neither man, nor beast, nor herb. Even so they found it as he said; for after the first day's ride from the town they came to the edge of this same waste, and on the fourth day were deep in the heart of it: a desert it was, rather rocky and stony and sandy than mountainous, though they had hills to cross also: withal there was but little water there, and that foul and stinking. Long lasted this waste, and Ralph thought indeed that it had been hard to cross, had not their way-leaders been; therefore he made marks and signs

by the wayside, and took note of the bearings of rocks and mounds against the day of return.

Twelve days they rode this waste, and on the thirteenth it began to mend somewhat, and there was a little grass, and sweet waters, and they saw ahead the swelling hills of a great woodland, albeit they had to struggle through marshland and low scrubby thicket for a day longer, or ever they got to the aforesaid trees, which at first were naught but pines; but these failed in a while, and they rode a grass waste nearly treeless, but somewhat well watered, where they gat them good store of venison. Thereafter they came on woods of oak and sweet-chestnut, with here and there a beech-wood.

Long and long they rode the woodland, but it was hard on May when they entered it, and it was pleasant therein, and what with one thing, what with another, they had abundant livelihood there. Yet was June at its full when at last they came within sight of the House of the Sorceress, on the hottest of a fair afternoon. And it was even as Ralph had seen it pictured in the arras of the hall of the Castle of Abundance; a little house built after the fashion of houses in his own land of the west; the thatch was trim, and the windows and doors were unbroken, and the garth was whole, and the goats feeding therein, and the wheat was tall and blossoming in the little closes, where as he had looked to see all broken down and wild, and as to the house, a mere grass-grown heap, or at the most a broken gable fast crumbling away.

Then waxed his heart sore with the memory of that passed time, and the sweetness of his short-lived love, though he refrained him all he might: yet forsooth Ursula looked on him anxiously, so much his face was changed by the thoughts of his heart.

But the elder of the way-leaders saw that he was moved, and deemed that he was wondering at that house so trim and orderly amidst the wildwood, so he said: "Here also do we after our behest to that marvellous and lovely Lady, that we suffer not this house to go to ruin: ever are some of our folk here, and every year about this season we send two or more to take the places of those who have dwelt in the House

year-long: so ever is there someone to keep all things trim. But as to strangers, I have never in my life seen any Seeker of the Well herein, save once, and that was an old hoar man like to me, save that he was feebler in all wise than I be."

Now Ralph heard him talking, yet noted his words but little; for it was with him as if all the grief of heart which he had penned back for so long a while swelled up within him and burst its bounds; and he turned toward Ursula and their eyes met, and she looked shy and anxious on him and he might no longer refrain himself, but put his hands to his face (for they had now drawn rein at the garth-gate) and brake out a weeping, and wept long for the friend whose feet had worn that path so often, and whose heart, though she were dead, had brought them thither for their thriving; and for love and sorrow of him Ursula wept also.

But the old man and his grandsons turned their heads away from his weeping, and got off their horses, and went up to the house-door, whereby were now standing a carle and a quean of their people. But Ralph slowly gat off his horse and stood by Ursula who was on the ground already, but would not touch her, for he was ashamed. But she looked on him kindly and said: "Dear friend, there is no need for shame; for though I be young, I know how grievous it is when the dead that we have loved come across our ways, and we may not speak to them, nor they to us. So I will but bid thee be comforted and abide in thy love for the living and the dead." His tears brake out again at that word, for he was but young, and for a while there was a lull in the strife that had beset his days. But after a little he looked up, and dashed the tears from his eyes and smiled on Ursula and said: "The tale she told me of this place, the sweetness of it came back upon me, and I might not forbear." She said: "O friend, thou art kind, and I love thee."

So then they joined hands and went through the garth together, and up to the door, where stood the wardens, who, when they saw them turning thither, came speedily down the path to them, and would have knelt in worship to them; but they would not suffer it, but embraced and kissed them, and thanked them many times for their welcome. The said

wardens, both carle and quean, were goodly folk of middle age, stalwart, and kind of face.

So then they went into the house together, and entered into the self-same chamber, where of old the Lady of Abundance had sickened for fear of the Sorceress sitting naked at her spell-work.

Great joy they made together, and the wardens set meat and drink before the guests, and they ate and drank and were of good cheer. But the elder who had brought them from Chestnut-dale said: "Dear friends, I have told you that these two young men are my grand-children, and they are the sons of this man and woman whom ye see; for the man is my son. And so it is, that amongst us the care of the Quest of the Well at the World's End hath for long been the heritage of our blood, going with us from father to son. Therefore is it naught wonderful, though I have been sundry times at this house, and have learned about the place all that may learned. For my father brought me hither when I was yet a boy; that time it was that I saw the last man of whom we know for sure that he drank of the Water of the Well, and he was that old hoar man like unto me, but, as I said, far weaker in all wise; but when he came back to us from the Well he was strong and stalwart, and a better man than I am now; and I heard him tell his name to my father, that he was called the Sage of Swevenham."

Ralph looked on Ursula and said: "Yea, father, and it was through him that we had our lore concerning the way hither; and it was he that bade us abide your coming in the rock-house of the Vale of Sweet-chestnuts."

"Then he is alive still," said the elder. Said Ralph: "Yea, and as fair and strong an old man as ye may lightly see." "Yea, yea," said the elder, "and yet fifty years ago his course seemed run."

Then said Ralph: "Tell me, father, have none of your own folk sought to the Well at the World's End?" "Nay, none," said the elder. Said Ralph: "That is strange, whereas ye are so nigh thereto, and have such abundant lore concerning the way."

"Son," said the elder, "true it is that the water of that Well

shall cause a man to thrive in all ways, and to live through many generations of men, maybe, in honour and good-liking; but it may not keep any man alive for ever; for so have the Gods given us the gift of death lest we weary of life. Now our folk live well and hale, and without the sickness and pestilence, such as I have heard oft befall folk in other lands: even as I heard the Sage of Swevenham say, and I wondered at his words. Of strife and of war also we know naught: nor do we desire aught which we may not easily attain to. Therefore we live long, and we fear the Gods if we should strive to live longer, lest they should bring upon us war and sickness, and over-weening desire, and weariness of life. Moreover it is little that all of us should seek to the Well at the World's End; and those few that sought and drank should be stronger and wiser than the others, and should make themselves earthly gods, and, maybe, should torment the others of us and make their lives a very burden to be borne. Of such matters are there tales current amongst us that so it hath been of yore and in other lands; and ill it were if such times came back upon us."

Ralph hung his head and was silent; for the joy of the Quest seemed dying out as the old man's words dropped slowly from his mouth. But he smiled upon Ralph and went on: "But for you, guests, it is otherwise, for ye of the World beyond the Mountains are stronger and more godlike than we, as all tales tell; and ye wear away your lives desiring that which ye may scarce get; and ye set your hearts on high things, desiring to be masters of the very Gods. Therefore ye know sickness and sorrow, and oft ye die before your time, so that ye must depart and leave undone things which ye deem ye were born to do; which to all men is grievous. And because of all this ye desire healing and thriving, whether good come of it, or ill. Therefore ye do but right to seek to the Well at the World's End, that ye may the better accomplish that which behoveth you, and that ye may serve your fellows and deliver them from the thralldom of those that be strong and unwise and unkind, of whom we have heard strange tales."

Ralph reddened as he spake, and Ursula looked on him

anxiously, but that talk dropped for the present, and they fell to talking of lighter and more familiar matters.

Thereafter they wandered about the woods with the wardens and the way-leaders, and the elder brought them to the ancient altar in the wood whereon the Sorceress had offered up the goat; and the howe of the woman dight with the necklace of the Quest whom the Lady found dead in the snow; and the place nigh the house where the Sorceress used to torment her thrall that was afterwards the Lady of Abundance; yea, and they went further afield till they came to the Vale of Lore, and the Heath above it where they met, the King's Son and the Lady. All these and other places were now become as hallowed ground to the Innocent People, and to Ralph no less. In the house, moreover, was a fair ark wherein they kept matters which had belonged to the Lady, as her shoes and her smock, wrapped in goodly cloth amidst well-smelling herbs; and these things they worshipped as folk do with relics of the saints. In another ark also they showed the seekers a book wherein was written lore concerning the Well, and the way thereto. But of this book had the Sage forewarned Ralph and his mate, and had bidden them look to it that they should read in it, and no otherwhere than at that ancient altar in the wood, they two alone, and clad in such-like gear as they wore when they hearkened to his reading by his hermitage. And so it was that they found the due raiment in the ark along with the book. Therefore day after day betimes in the morning they bore the said book to the altar and read therein, till they had learned much wisdom.

Thus they did for eight days, and on the ninth they rested and were merry with their hosts: but on the tenth day they mounted their horses and said farewell, and departed by the ways they had learned of, they two alone. And they had with them bread and meal, as much as they might bear, and water-skins moreover, that they might fill them at the last sweet water before they came to the waterless desert.

CHAPTER 17

They Come Through the Woodland to the Thirsty Desert

So they ride their ways, and when they were come well into the wildwood past the house, and had spoken but few words to each other, Ralph put forth his hand, and stayed Ursula, and they gat off their horses under a great-limbed oak, and did off their armour, and sat down on the greensward there, and loved each other dearly, and wept for joy of their pain and travail and love. And afterwards, as they sat side by side leaning up against the great oak-bole, Ralph spake and said: "Now are we two once again all alone in the uttermost parts of the earth, and belike we are not very far from the Well at the World's End; and now I have bethought me that if we gain that which we seek for, and bear back our lives to our own people, the day may come when we are grown old, for as young as we may seem, that we shall be as lonely then as we are this hour, and that the folk round about us shall be to us as much and no more than these trees and the wild things that dwell amongst them."

She looked on him and laughed as one over-happy, and said: "Thou runnest forward swiftly to meet trouble, beloved! But I say that well will it be in those days if I love the folk then as well as now I love these trees and the wild things whose house they are."

And she rose up therewith and threw her arms about the oak-bole and kissed its ruggedness, while Ralph as he lay kissed the sleekness of her feet. And there came a robin hopping over the leaves anigh them, for in that wood most of the creatures, knowing not man, were tame to him, and feared the horses of those twain more than their riders. And now as Ursula knelt to embrace Ralph with one hand, she

held out the other to the said robin who perched on her wrist, and sat there as a hooded falcon had done, and fell to whistling his sweet notes, as if he were a-talking to those new-comers: then Ursula gave him a song-reward of their broken meat, and he flew up and perched on her shoulder, and nestled up against her cheek, and she laughed happily and said: "Lo you, sweet, have not the wild things understood my words, and sent this fair messenger to foretell us all good?"

"It is good," said Ralph laughing, "yet the oak-tree hath not spoken yet, despite of all thy kissing: and lo there goes thy friend the robin, now thou hast no more meat to give him."

"He is flying towards the Well at the World's End," she said, "and biddeth us onward: let us to horse and hasten: for if thou wilt have the whole truth concerning my heart, it is this, that some chance-hap may yet take thee from me ere thou hast drunk of the waters of the Well."

"Yea," said Ralph, "and in the innermost of my heart lieth the fear that mayhappen there is no Well, and no healing in it if we find it, and that death, and the backward way may yet sunder us. This is the worst of my heart, and evil is my coward fear."

But she cast her arms about him and kissed and caressed him, and cried out: "Yea, then fair have been the days of our journeying, and fair this hour of the green oak! And bold and true thine heart that hath led thee thus far, and won thee thy desire of my love."

So then they armed them, and mounted their horses and set forward. They lived well while they were in the wood, but on the third day they came to where it thinned and at last died out into a stony waste like unto that which they had passed through before they came to the House of the Sorceress, save that this lay in ridges as the waves of a great sea; and these same ridges they were bidden to cross over at their highest, lest they should be bewildered in a maze of little hills and dales leading no whither.

So they entered on this desert, having filled their water-skins at a clear brook, whereat they rejoiced when they found that the face of the wilderness was covered with a salt

scurf, and that naught grew there save a sprinkling of small sage bushes.

Now on the second day of their riding this ugly waste, as they came up over the brow of one of these stony ridges, Ralph the far-sighted cried out suddenly: "Hold! for I see a man weaponed."

"Where is he?" quoth Ursula, "and what is he about?" Said Ralph: "He is up yonder on the swell of the next ridge, and by seeming is asleep leaning against a rock."

Then he bent the Turk bow and set an arrow on the string and they went on warily. When they were down at the foot of the ridge Ralph hailed the man with a lusty cry, but gat no answer of him; so they went on up the bent, till Ralph said: "Now I can see his face under his helm, and it is dark and the eyes are hollow: I will off horse and go up to him afoot, but do thou, beloved, sit still in thy saddle."

But when he had come nigher, he turned and cried out to her: "The man is dead, come anigh." So she went up to him and dismounted, and they both together stood over the man, who was lying up against a big stone like one at rest. How long he had lain there none knows but God; for in the saltness of the dry desert the flesh had dried on his bones without corrupting, and was as hardened leather. He was in full armour of a strange and ancient fashion, and his sword was girt to his side, neither was there any sign of a wound about him. Under a crag anigh him they found his horse, dead and dry like to himself; and a little way over the brow of the ridge another horse in like case; and close by him a woman whose raiment had not utterly perished, nor her hair; there were gold rings on her arms, and her shoes were done with gold: she had a knife stuck in her breast, with her hand still clutching the handle thereof; so that it seemed that she had herself given herself death.

Ralph and Ursula buried these two with the heaping of stones and went their ways; but some two miles thence they came upon another dead man-at-arms, and near him an old man unweaponed, and they heaped stones on them.

Thereabout night overtook them, and it was dark, so they lay down in the waste, and comforted each other, and slept

two or three hours, but arose with the first glimmer of dawn, and mounted and rode forth onward, that they might the sooner be out of that deadly desert, for fear clung to their hearts.

This day, forsooth, they found so many dead folk, that they might not stay to bury them, lest they themselves should come to lie there lacking burial. So they made all the way they might, and rode on some hours by starlight after the night was come, for it was clear and cold. So that at last they were so utterly wearied that they lay down amongst those dead folk, and slept soundly.

On the morrow morn Ralph awoke and saw Ursula sleeping peacefully as he deemed, and he looked about on the dreary desert and its dead men and saw no end to it, though they lay on the top of one of those stony bents; and he said softly to himself: "Will it end at all then? Surely all this people of the days gone by were Seekers of the Well as we be; and have they belike turned back from somewhere further on, and might not escape the desert despite of all? Shall we turn now: shall we turn? surely we might get into the kindly wood from here."

So he spake; but Ursula sat up (for she was not asleep) and said: "The perils of the waste being abundant and exceeding hard to face, would not the Sage or his books have told us of the most deadly?" Said Ralph: "Yet here are all these dead, and we were not told of them, nevertheless we have seen the token on the rocks oft-times yesterday, so we are yet in the road, unless all this hath been but a snare and a betrayal."

She shook her head, and was silent a little; then she said: "Ralph, my lad, didst thou see this token (and she set hand to the beads about her neck) on any of those dead folk yesterday?" "Nay," said Ralph, "though sooth to say I looked for it." "And I in likewise," she said; "for indeed I had misgivings as the day grew old; but now I say, let us on in the faith of that token and the kindness of the Sage, and the love of the Innocent People; yea, and thy luck, O lad of the green fields far away, that hath brought thee unscathed so far from Upmeads."

So they mounted and rode forth, and saw more and more of the dead folk; and ever and anon they looked to them to note if they wore the beads like to them but saw none so dight. Then Ursula said: "Yea, why should the Sage and the books have told us aught of these dead bodies, that are but as the plenishing of the waste; like to the flowers that are cast down before the bier of a saint on a holy-day to be trodden under foot by the churls and the vicars of the close. Forsooth had they been alive now, with swords to smite withal, and hands to drag us into captivity, it had been another matter: but against these I feel bold."

Ralph sighed, and said: "Yea, but even if we die not in the waste, yet this is piteous; so many lives passed away, so many hopes slain."

"Yea," she said; "but do not folk die there in the world behind us? I have seen sights far worser than this at Utterbol, little while as I was there. Moreover I can note that this army of dead men has not come all in one day or one year, but in a long, long while, by one and two and three; for hast thou not noted that their raiment and wargear both, is of many fashions, and some much more perished than other, long as things last in this Dry Waste? I say that men die as in the world beyond, but here we see them as they lie dead, and have lain for so long."

He said: "I fear neither the Waste nor the dead men, if thou fearest not, beloved: but I lament for these poor souls."

"And I also," said she; "therefore let us on, that we may come to those whose grief we may heal."

CHAPTER 18

They Come to the Dry Tree

Presently as they rode they had before them one of the greatest of those land-waves, and they climbed it slowly, going afoot and leading their horses; but when they were but a little way from the brow they saw, over a gap thereof, something, as it were huge horns rising up into the air beyond the crest of the ridge. So they marvelled, and drew their swords, and held them still awhile, misdoubting if this were perchance some terrible monster of the waste; but whereas the thing moved not at all, they plucked up heart and fared on.

So came they to the brow and looked over it into a valley, about which on all sides went the ridge, save where it was broken down into a narrow pass on the further side, so that the said valley was like to one of those theatres of the ancient Roman Folk, whereof are some to be seen in certain lands. Neither did those desert benches lack their sitters; for all down the sides of the valley sat or lay children of men; some women, but most men-folk, of whom the more part were weaponed, and some with their drawn swords in their hands. Whatever semblance of moving was in them was when the eddying wind of the valley stirred the rags of their raiment, or the long hair of the women. But a very midmost of this dreary theatre rose up a huge and monstrous tree, whose topmost branches were even the horns which they had seen from below the hill's brow. Leafless was that tree and lacking of twigs, and its bole upheld but some fifty of great limbs, and as they looked on it, they doubted whether it were

not made by men's hands rather than grown up out of the earth. All round about the roots of it was a pool of clear water, that cast back the image of the valley-side and the bright sky of the desert, as though it had been a mirror of burnished steel. The limbs of that tree were all behung with blazoned shields and knight's helms, and swords, and spears, and axes, and hauberks; and it rose up into the air some hundred feet above the flat of the valley.

For a while they looked down silently on to this marvel, then from both their lips at once came the cry THE DRY TREE. Then Ralph thrust his sword back into his sheath and said: "Meseems I must needs go down amongst them; there is naught to do us harm here; for all these are dead like the others that we saw."

Ursula turned to him with burning cheeks and sparkling eyes, and said eagerly: "Yea, yea, let us go down, else might we chance to miss something that we ought to wot of."

Therewith she also sheathed her sword, and they went both of them down together, and that easily; for as aforesaid the slope was as if it had been cut into steps for their feet. And as they passed by the dead folk, for whom they had often to turn aside, they noted that each of the dead leathery faces was drawn up in a grin, as though they had died in pain, and yet beguiled, so that all those visages looked somewhat alike, as though they had come from the workshop of one craftsman.

At last Ralph and Ursula stood on the level ground underneath the Tree, and they looked up at the branches, and down to the water at their feet; and now it seemed to them as though the Tree had verily growth in it, for they beheld its roots, that they went out from the mound or islet of earth into the water, and spread abroad therein, and seemed to waver about. So they walked around the Tree, and looked up at the shields that hung on its branches, but saw no blazon that they knew, though they were many and diverse; and the armour also and weapons were very diverse of fashion.

Now when they were come back again to the place where they had first stayed, Ralph said: "I thirst, and so belike dost

thou; and here is water good and clear; let us drink then, and so spare our water-skins, for belike the dry desert is yet long." And therewith he knelt down that he might take of the water in the hollow of his hand. But Ursula drew him back, and cried out in terror: "O Ralph, do it not! Seest thou not this water, that although it be bright and clear, so that we may see all the pebbles at the bottom, yet nevertheless when the wind eddies about, and lifts the skirts of our raiment, it makes no ripple on the face of the pool, and doubtless it is heavy with venom; and moreover there is no sign of the way hereabout, as at other watering-steads; O forbear, Ralph!"

Then he rose up and drew back with her but slowly and unwillingly as she deemed; and they stood together a while gazing on these marvels. But lo amidst of this while, there came a crow wheeling over the valley of the dead, and he croaked over the Dry Tree, and let himself drop down to the edge of the pool, whereby he stalked about a little after the manner of his kind. Then he thrust his neb into the water and drank, and thereafter took wing again; but ere he was many feet off the ground he gave a grievous croak, and turning over in the air fell down stark dead close to the feet of those twain; and Ralph cried out but spake no word with meaning therein; then said Ursula: "Yea, thus are we saved from present death." Then she looked in Ralph's face, and turned pale and said hastily: "O my friend how is it with thee?" But she waited not for an answer, but turned her face to the bent whereby they had come down, and cried out in a loud, shrill voice: "O Ralph, Ralph! look up yonder to the ridge whereby we left our horses; look, look! there glitters a spear and stirreth! and lo a helm underneath the spear: tarry not, let us save our horses!"

Then Ralph let a cry out from his mouth, and set off running to the side of the slope, and fell to climbing it with great strides, not heeding Ursula; but she followed close after, and scrambled up with foot and hand and knee, till she stood beside him on the top, and he looked around wildly and cried out: "Where! where are they?"

"Nowhere," she said, "it was naught but my word to draw

thee from death; but praise to the saints that thou are come alive out of the accursed valley."

He seemed not to hearken, but turned about once, and beat the air with his hands, and then fell down on his back; and with a great wail she cast herself upon him, for she deemed at first that he was dead. But she took a little water from one of their skins, and cast it into his face, and took a flask of cordial from her pouch, and set it to his lips, and made him drink somewhat thereof. So in a while he came to himself and opened his eyes and smiled upon her, and she took his head in her hands and kissed his cheek, and he sat up and said feebly: "Shall we not go down into the valley? there is naught there to harm us."

"We have been down there already," she said, "and well it is that we are not both lying there now."

Then he got to his feet, and stretched himself, and yawned like one just awakened from long sleep. But she said: "Let us to horse and begone; it is early hours to slumber, for those that are seeking the Well at the World's End."

He smiled on her again and took her hand, and she led him to his horse, and helped him till he was in the saddle, and lightly she gat a-horseback, and they rode away swiftly from that evil place; and after a while Ralph was himself again, and remembered all that had happened till he fell down on the brow of the ridge. Then he praised Ursula's wisdom and valiancy till she bade him forbear lest he weary her. Albeit she drew up close to him and kissed his face sweetly.

CHAPTER 19

They Come Out of the Thirsty Desert

Past the Valley of the Dry Tree they saw but few dead men lying about, and soon they saw never another: and, though the land was still utterly barren, and all cast up into ridges as before, yet the salt slime grew less and less, and before nightfall of that day they had done with it: and the next day those stony waves were lower; and the next again the waste was but a swelling plain, and here and there they came on patches of dwarf willow, and other harsh and scanty herbage, whereof the horses might have a bait, which they sore needed, for now was their fodder done: but both men and horses were sore athirst; for, as carefully as they had hoarded their water, there was now but little left, which they durst not drink till they were driven perforce, lest they should yet die of drought.

They journeyed long that day, and whereas the moon was up at night-tide they lay not down till she was set; and their resting place was by some low bushes, whereabout was rough grass mingled with willow-herb, whereby Ralph judged that they drew nigh to water, so or ever they slept, they and the horses all but emptied the water-skins. They heard some sort of beasts roaring in the night, but they were too weary to watch, and might not make a fire.

When Ralph awoke in the morning he cried out that he could see the woodland; and Ursula arose at his cry and looked where he pointed, and sure enough there were trees on a rising ground some two miles ahead, and beyond them, not very far by seeming, they beheld the tops of great dark

mountains. On either hand moreover, nigh on their right hand, far off on their left, ran a reef of rocks, so that their way seemed to be as between two walls. And these said reefs were nowise like those that they had seen of late, but black and, as to their matter, like to the great mountains by the rock of the Fighting Man: but as the reefs ran eastward they seemed to grow higher.

Now they mounted their horses at once and rode on; and the beasts were as eager as they were, and belike smelt the water. So when they had ridden but three miles, they saw a fair little river before them winding about exceedingly, but flowing eastward on the whole. So they spurred on with light hearts and presently were on the banks of the said river, and its waters were crystal-clear, though its sands were black: and the pink-blossomed willow-herb was growing abundantly on the sandy shores. Close to the water was a black rock, as big as a man, whereon was graven the sign of the way; so they knew that there was no evil in the water, wherefore they drank their fill and watered their horses abundantly, and on the further bank was there abundance of good grass. So when they had drunk their fill, for the pleasure of the cool water they waded the ford barefoot, and it was scarce above Ursula's knee. Then they had great joy to lie on the soft grass and eat their meat, while the horses tore eagerly at the herbage close to them. So when they had eaten, they rested awhile, but before they went further they despoiled them, one after other, and bathed in a pool of the river to wash the foul wilderness off them. Then again they rested and let the horses yet bite the grass, and departed not from that pleasant place till it was two hours after noon. As they were lying there Ralph said he could hear a great roar like the sound of many waters, but very far off: but to Ursula it seemed naught but the wind waxing in the boughs of the woodland anigh them.

CHAPTER 20

They Come to the Ocean Sea

Being come to the wood they went not very far into it that day, for they were minded to rest them after the weariness of the wilderness: they feasted on a hare which Ralph shot, and made a big fire to keep off evil beasts, but none came nigh them, though they heard the voices of certain beasts as the night grew still. To be short, they slept far into the morrow's morn, and then, being refreshed, and their horses also, they rode strongly all day, and found the wood to be not very great; for before sunset they were come to its outskirts, and the mountains lay before them. These were but little like to that huge wall they had passed through on their way to Chestnut-dale, being rather great hills than mountains, grass-grown, and at their feet somewhat wooded, and by seeming not over hard to pass over.

The next day they entered them by a pass marked with the token, which led them about by a winding way till they were on the side of the biggest fell of all; so there they rested that night in a fair little hollow or dell in the mountain-side. There in the stillness of the night both Ursula, as well as Ralph, heard that roaring of a great water, and they said to each other that it must be the voice of the Sea, and they rejoiced thereat, for they had learned by the Sage and his books that they must needs come to the verge of the Ocean-Sea, which girdles the earth about. So they arose betimes on the morrow, and set to work to climb the mountain, going mostly a-foot; and the way was long, but not craggy or exceeding steep, so that in five hours' time they were at the

mountain-top, and coming over the brow beheld beneath them fair green slopes besprinkled with trees, and beyond them, some three or four miles away, the blue landless sea, and on either hand of them was the sea also, so that they were nigh-hand at the ending of a great ness, and there was naught beyond it; and naught to do if they missed the Well, but to turn back by the way they had come.

Now when they saw this they were exceedingly moved, and they looked on one another, and each saw that the other was pale, with glistening eyes, since they were to come to the very point of their doom, and that it should be seen whether there were no such thing as the Well in all the earth, but that they had been chasing a fair-hued cloud; or else their Quest should be achieved and they should have the world before them, and they happy and mighty, and of great worship amidst all men.

Little they tarried, but gat them down the steep of the mountain, and so lower and lower till they were come to ground nigh level; and then at last it was but thus, that without any great rock-wall or girdle of marvellous and strange land, there was an end of earth, with its grass and trees and streams, and a beginning of the ocean, which stretched away changeless, and it might be for ever. Where the land ended there was but a cliff of less than an hundred feet above the eddying of the sea; and on the very point of the ness was a low green toft with a square stone set atop of it, whereon as they drew nigh they saw the token graven, yea on each face thereof.

Then they went along the edge of the cliff a mile on each side of the said toft, and then finding naught else to note, naught save the grass and the sea, they came back to that place of the token, and sat down on the grass of the toft.

It was now evening, and the sun was setting beyond them, but they could behold a kind of stair cut in the side of the cliff, and on the first step whereof was the token done; wherefore they knew that they were bidden to go down by the said stair; but it seemed to lead no whither, save straight into the sea. And whiles it came into Ralph's mind that this

was naught but a mock, as if to bid the hapless seekers cast themselves down from the earth, and be done with it for ever. But in any case they might not try the adventure of that stair by the failing light, and with the night long before them. So when they had hoppled their horses, and left them to graze at their will on the sweet grass of the meadow, they laid them down behind the green toft, and, being forwearied, it was no long time ere they twain slept fast at the uttermost end of the world.

CHAPTER 21

Now They Drink of the Well at the World's End

Ralph awoke from some foolish morning dream of Upmeads, wondering where he was, or what familiar voice had cried out his name: then he raised himself on his elbow, and saw Ursula standing before him with flushed face and sparkling eyes, and she was looking out seaward, while she called on his name. So he sprang up and strove with the slumber that still hung about him, and as his eyes cleared he looked down, and saw that the sea, which last night had washed the face of the cliff, had now ebbed far out, and left bare betwixt the billows and the cliff some half mile of black sand, with rocks of the like hue rising out of it here and there. But just below the place where they stood, right up against the cliff, was builded by man's hand of huge stones a garth of pound, the wall whereof was some seven feet high, and the pound within the wall of forty feet space endlong and overthwart; and the said pound was filled with the waters of a spring that came forth from the face of the cliff as they deemed, though from above they might not see the issue

thereof; but the water ran seaward from the pound by some way unseen, and made a wide stream through the black sand of the foreshore: but ever the great basin filled somewhat faster than it voided, so that it ran over the lip on all sides, making a thin veil over the huge ashlar-stones of the garth. The day was bright and fair with no wind, save light airs playing about from the westward ort, and all things gleamed and glittered in the sun.

Ralph stood still a moment, and they stretched abroad his arms, and with a great sob cast them round about the body of his beloved, and strained her to his bosom as he murmured about her, THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END. But she wept for joy as she fawned upon him, and let her hands beat upon his body.

But when they were somewhat calmed of their ecstasy of joy, they made ready to go down by that rocky stair. And first they did off their armour and other gear, and when they were naked they did on the hallowed raiment which they had out of the ark in the House of the Sorceress; and so clad gat them down the rock-hewn stair, Ralph going first, lest there should be any broken place; but naught was amiss with those hard black stones, and they came safely to a level place of the rock, whence they could see the face of the cliff, and how the waters of the Well came gushing forth from a hollow therein in a great swelling wave as clear as glass; and the sun glistened in it and made a foam-bow about its edges. But above the issue of the waters the black rock had been smoothed by man's art, and thereon was graven the Sword and the Bough, and above it these words, to wit:

YE WHO HAVE COME A LONG WAY TO LOOK UPON ME, DRINK OF ME, IF YE DEEM THAT YE BE STRONG ENOUGH IN DESIRE TO BEAR LENGTH OF DAYS: OR ELSE DRINK NOT; BUT TELL YOUR FRIENDS AND THE KINDREDS OF THE EARTH HOW YE HAVE SEEN A GREAT MARVEL.

So they looked long and wondered; and Ursula said: "Deemest thou, my friend, that any have come thus far and forborne to drink?"

Said Ralph: "Surely not even the exceeding wise might remember the bitterness of his wisdom as he stood here."

Then he looked on her and his face grew bright beyond measure, and cried out: "O love, love! why tarry we? For yet I fear lest we be come too late, and thou die before mine eyes ere yet thou hast drunken."

"Yea," she said, "and I also fear for thee, though thy face is ruddy and thine eyes sparkle, and thou art as lovely as the Captain of the Lord's hosts."

Then she laughed, and her laughter was as silver bells rung tunably, and she said: "But where is the cup for the drinking?"

But Ralph looked on the face of the wall, and about the height of his hand saw square marks thereon, as though there were an ambrye; and amidst the square was a knop of latten, all green with the weather and the salt spray. So Ralph set his hand to the knop and drew strongly, and lo it was a door made of a squared stone hung on brazen hinges, and it opened easily to him, and within was a cup of goldsmith's work, with the sword and the bough done thereon; and round about the rim writ this posey: "THE STRONG OF HEART SHALL DRINK FROM ME." So Ralph took it and held it aloft so that its pure metal flashed in the sun, and he said: "This is for thee, Sweetling."

"Yea, and for thee," she said.

Now that level place, or bench-table went up to the very gushing and green bow of the water, so Ralph took Ursula's hand and led her along, she going a little after him, till he was close to the Well, and stood amidst the spray-bow thereof, so that he looked verily like one of the painted angels on the choir wall of St. Laurence of Upmeads. Then he reached forth his hand and thrust the cup into the water, holding it stoutly because the gush of the stream was strong, so that the water of the Well splashed all over him, wetting Ursula's face and breast withal: and he felt that the water was sweet without any saltness of the sea. But he turned to Ursula and reached out the full cup to her, and said: "Sweetling, call a health over the cup!"

She took it and said: "To thy life, beloved!" and drank withal, and her eyes looked out of the cup the while, like a child's when he drinketh. Then she gave him the cup again and said: "Drink, and tarry not, lest thou die and I live."

Then Ralph plunged the cup into the waters again, and he held the cup aloft, and cried out: "To the Earth, and the World of Manfolk!" and therewith he drank.

For a minute then they clung together within the spray-bow of the Well, and then she took his hand and led him back to the midst of the bench-table, and he put the cup into the ambrye, and shut it up again, and then they sat them down on the widest of the platform under the shadow of a jutting rock; for the sun was hot; and therewithal a sweet weariness began to steal over them, though there was speech betwixt them for a little, and Ralph said: "How is it with thee, beloved?"

"O well indeed," she said.

Quoth he: "And how tasteth to thee the water of the Well?"

Slowly she spake and sleepily: "It tasted good, and as if thy love were blended with it."

And she smiled in his face; but he said: "One thing I wonder over: how shall we wot if we have drunk aright? For whereas if we were sick or old and failing, or ill-liking, and were now presently healed of all this, and become strong and fair to look on, then should we know it for sure—but now, though, as I look on thee, I behold thee the fairest of all women, and on thy face is no token of toil and travail, and the weariness of the way; and though the heart-ache of loneliness and captivity, and the shame of Utterbol has left no mark upon thee—yet hast thou not always been sweet to my eyes, and as sweet as might be? And how then?" . . . But he broke off and looked on her and she smiled upon the love in his eyes, and his head fell back and he slept with a calm and smiling face. And she leaned over him to kiss his face, but even therewith her own eyes closed and she laid her head upon his breast, and slept as peacefully as he.

CHAPTER 22

Now They Have Drunk and Are Glad

Long they slept till the shadows were falling from the west, and the sea was flowing fast again over the sands beneath them, though there was still a great space bare betwixt the cliff and the sea. Then spake Ursula as if Ralph had but just left speaking; and she said: "Yea, dear lord, and I also say, that, lovely as thou art now, never hast thou been aught else but lovely to me. But tell me, hast thou had any scar of a hurt upon thy body? For if now that were gone, surely it should be a token of the renewal of thy life. But if it be not gone, then there may yet be another token."

Then he stood upon his feet, and she cried out: "O but thou art fair and mighty, who now shall dare gainsay thee? Who shall not long for thee?"

Said Ralph: "Look, love! how the sea comes over the sand like the creeping of a sly wood-snake! Shall we go hence and turn from the ocean-sea without wetting our bodies in its waters?"

"Let us go," she said.

So they went down on to the level sands, and along the edges of the sweet-water stream that flowed from the Well; and Ralph said: "Beloved, I will tell thee of that which thou hast asked me: when I was but a lad of sixteen winters there rode men a-lifting into Upmeads, and Nicholas Long-shanks, who is a wise man of war, gathered force and went against them, and I must needs ride beside him. Now we came to our above, and put the thieves to the road; but in the hurly I got a claw from the war-beast, for the stroke of a

sword sheared me off somewhat from my shoulder: belike thou hast seen the scar and loathed it."

"It is naught loathsome," she said, "for a lad to be a bold warrior, nor for a grown man to think lightly of the memory of death drawn near for the first time. Yea, I have noted it; but let me see now what has befallen with it."

As she spoke they were come to a salt pool in a rocky bight on their right hand, which the tide was filling speedily; and Ralph spake: "See now, this is the bath of the water of the ocean sea." So they were speedily naked and playing in the water: and Ursula took Ralph by the arm and looked to his shoulder and said: "O my lad of the pale edges, where is gone thy glory? There is no mark of the sword's pilgrimage on thy shoulder." "Nay, none?" quoth he.

"None, none!" she said, "Didst thou say the very sooth of thy hurt in the battle, O poor lad of mine?" "Yea, the sooth," said he. Then she laughed sweetly and merrily like the chuckle of a flute over the rippling waters, that rose higher and higher about them, and she turned her eyes askance and looked adown to her own sleek side, and laid her hand on it and laughed again. Then said Ralph: "What is toward, beloved? For thy laugh is rather of joy that of mirth alone."

She said: "O smooth-skinned warrior, O Lily and Rose of battle; here on my side yesterday was the token of the hart's tyne that gored me when I was a young maiden five years ago: look now and pity the maiden that lay on the grass of the forest, and the woodman a-passing by deemed her dead five years ago."

Ralph stooped down as the ripple washed away from her, then said: "In sooth here is no mark nor blemish, but the best handiwork of God, as when he first made a woman from the side of the Ancient Father of the field of Damask. But lo you, love, how swift the tide cometh up, and I long to see thy feet on the green grass, and I fear the sea, lest it stir the joy over strongly in our hearts and we be not able to escape from its waves."

So they went up from out of the water, and did on the hallowed raiment fragrant with strange herbs, and passed

joyfully up the sand towards the cliff and its stair; and speedily withal, for so soon as they were clad again, the little ripple of the sea was nigh touching their feet. As they went, they noted that the waters of the Well flowed seaward from the black-walled pound by three arched openings in its outer face, and they beheld the mason's work, how goodly it was; for it was as if it had been cut out of the foot of a mountain, so well jointed were its stones, and its walls solid against any storm that might drive against it.

They climbed the stair, and sat them down on the green grass awhile watching the ocean coming in over the sand and the rocks, and Ralph said: "I will tell thee, sweetling, that I am grown eager for the road; though true it is that whiles I was down yonder amidst the ripple of the sea I longed for naught but thee, though thou wert beside me, and thy joyous words were as fire to the heart of my love. But now that I am on the green grass of the earth I called to mind a dream that came to me when we slept after the precious draught of the Well: for methought that I was standing before the porch of the Feast-hall of Upmeads and holding thine hand, and the ancient House spake to me with the voice of a man, greeting both thee and me, and praising thy goodliness and valiancy. Surely then it is calling me to deeds, and if it were but morning, as it is now drawing towards sunset, we would mount and be gone straightway."

"Surely," she said, "thou hast drunk of the Well, and the fear of thee has already entered into the hearts of thy foemen far away, even as the love of thee constraineth me as I lie by thy side; but since it is evening and sunset, let it be evening, and let the morning see to its own matters. So now let us be pilgrims again, and eat the meal of pilgrims, and see to our horses, and then wander about this lovely wilderness and its green meads, where no son of man heedeth the wild things, till the night come, bringing to us the rest and the sleep of them that have prevailed over many troubles."

Even so they did, and broke bread above the sea, and looked to their horses, and then went hand in hand about the goodly green bents betwixt the sea and the rough of the

mountain; and it was the fairest and softest of summer evenings; and the deer of that place, both little and great, had no fear of man, but the hart and hind came to Ursula's hand; and the thrushes perched upon her shoulder, and the hares gambolled together close to the feet of the twain; so that it seemed to them that they had come into the very Garden of God; and they forgat all the many miles of the waste and the mountain that lay before them, and they had no thought for the strife of foemen and the thwarting of kindred, that belike awaited them in their own land, but they thought of the love and happiness of the hour that was passing. So sweetly they wore through the last minutes of the day, and when it was as dark as it would be in that fair season, they lay down by the green knoll at the ending of the land, and were lulled to sleep by the bubbling of the Well at the World's End.

BOOK FOUR

The Road Home

CHAPTER 1

Ralph and Ursula Come Back Again Through the Great Mountains

On the morrow morning they armed them and took to their horses and departed from that pleasant place and climbed the mountain without weariness, and made provision of meat and drink for the Dry Desert, and so entered it, and journeyed happily with naught evil befalling them till they came back to the House of the Sorceress; and of the Desert they made little, and the wood was pleasant to them after the drought of the Desert.

But at the said House they saw those kind people, and they saw in their eager eyes as in a glass how they had been bettered by their drinking of the Well, and the Elder said to them: "Dear friends, there is no need to ask you whether ye have achieved your quest; for ye, who before were lovely, are now become as the very Gods who rule the world. And now methinks we have to pray you but one thing, to wit that ye will not be overmuch of Gods, but will be kind and lowly with them that needs must worship you."

They laughed on him for kindness' sake, and kissed and embraced the old man, and they thanked them all for their helping, and they abode with them for a whole day in good-will and love, and thereafter the carle, who was the son of the Elder, with his wife, bade farewell to his kinsmen, and led Ralph and Ursula back through the wood and over the desert to the town of the Innocent Folk. The said Folk received them in all joy and triumph, and would have them abide there the winter over. But they prayed leave to depart, because their hearts were sore for their own land and their kindred. So they abode there but two days, and on the third day were led away by a half score of men gaily apparelled after their manner, and having with them many sumpter-beasts with provision for the road. With this fellowship they came safely and with little pain unto Chestnut Vale, where they abode but one night, though to Ralph and Ursula the place was sweet for the memory of their loving sojourn there.

They would have taken leave of the Innocent Folk in the said vale, but those others must needs go with them a little further, and would not leave them till they were come to the jaws of the pass which led to the Rock of the Fighting Man. Further than that indeed they would not, or durst not go; and those huge mountains they called the Wall of Strife, even as they on the other side called them the Wall of the World.

So the twain took leave of their friends there, and howbeit that they had drunk of the Well at the World's End, yet were their hearts grieved at the parting. The kind folk left with them abundant provision for the remnant of the road, and a sumpter-ox to bear it; so they were in no doubt of their livelihood. Moreover, though the turn of autumn was come again and winter was at hand, yet the weather was fair and calm, and their journey through the dreary pass was as light as it might be to any men.

CHAPTER 2

They Hear New Tidings of Utterbol

It was on a fair evening of later autumn-tide that they won their way out of the Gates of the Mountains, and came under the rock of the Fighting Man. There they kissed and comforted each other in memory of the terror and loneliness wherewith they had entered the Mountains that other time; though, sooth to say, it was to them now like the reading of sorrow in a book.

But when they came out with joyful hearts into the green plain betwixt the mountains and the River of Lava, they looked westward, and beheld no great way off a little bower or cot, builded of boughs and rushes by a blackthorn copse; and as they rode toward it they saw a man come forth therefrom, and presently saw that he was hoary, a man with a long white beard. Then Ralph gave a glad cry, and set spurs to his horse and galloped over the plain; for he deemed that it could be none other than the Sage of Swevenham; and Ursula came pricking after him laughing for joy. The old man abode their coming, and Ralph leapt off his horse at once, and kissed and embraced him; but the Sage said: "There is no need to ask thee of tidings; for thine eyes and thine whole body tell me that thou hast drunk of the Well at the World's End. And that shall be better for thee belike than it has been for me; though for me also the world has not gone ill after my fashion since I drank of that water."

Then was Ursula come up, and she also lighted down and made much of the Sage. But he said: "Hail, daughter! It is sweet to see thee so, and to wot that thou art in the hands of a mighty man: for I know that Ralph thy man is minded for his Father's House, and the deeds that abide him there; and I think we may journey a little way together; for as for me, I

would go back to Swevenham to end my days there, whether they be long or short."

But Ralph said: "As for that, thou mayst go further than Swevenham, and as far as Upmeads, where there will be as many to love and cherish thee as at Swevenham."

The old man laughed a little, and reddened withal, but answered nothing.

Then they untrussed their sumpter-beast, and took meat and drink from his burden, and they ate and drank together, sitting on the green grass there; and the twain made great joy of the Sage, and told him the whole tale; and he told them that he had been abiding there since the spring-tide, lest they might have turned back without accomplishing their quest, and then may-happen he should have been at hand to comfort them, or the one of them left, if so it had befallen. "But," quoth he, "since ye have verily drunk of the Well at the World's End, ye have come back no later than I looked for you."

That night they slept in the bower there, and on the morrow betimes, the Sage drove together three or four milch goats that he pastured there, and went their ways over the plain, and so in due time entered into the lava-sea. But the first night that they lay there, though it was moonless and somewhat cloudy, they saw no glare of the distant earth-fires which they had looked for; and when on the morrow they questioned the Sage thereof, he said: "The Earth-fires ceased about the end of last year, as I have heard tell. But sooth it is that the foreboding of the Giant's Candle was not for naught. For there hath verily been a change of masters at Utterbol."

"Yea," said Ralph, "for better or worse?"

Said the Sage: "It could scarce have been for worse; but if rumour runneth right it is much for the better. Hearken how I learned thereof. One fair even of late March, a little before I set off hither, as I was sitting before the door of my house, I saw the glint of steel through the wood, and presently rode up a sort of knights and men-at-arms, about a score; and at the head of them a man on a big red-roan horse, with his surcoat blazoned with a white bull on a green field: he was a man black-haired, but blue-eyed; not very big, but well knit and strong, and looked both doughty and knightly; and he wore a

gold coronet about his basnet: so not knowing his blazonry, I wondered who it was that durst be so bold as to ride in the lands of the Lord of Utterbol. Now he rode up to me and craved a drink of milk, for he had seen my goats; so I milked two goats for him, and brought whey for the others, whereas I had no more goats in milk at that season. So the bull-knight spake to me about the woodland, and wherefore I dwelt there apart from others; somewhat rough in his speech he was, yet rather jolly than fierce; and he thanked me for the bever kindly enough, and said: "I deem that it will not avail to give thee money; but I shall give thee what may be of avail to thee. Ho, Gervaise! give me one of those scrolls!" So a squire hands him a parchment and he gave it me, and it was a safe-conduct to the bearer from the Lord of Utterbol; but whereas I saw that the seal bore not the Bear on the Castle-wall, but the Bull, and that the superscription was unknown to me, I held the said scroll in my hand and wondered; and the knight said to me: "Yea, look long at it; but so it is, though thou trow it not, that I am verily Lord of Utterbol, and that by conquest; so that belike I am mightier than he was, for that mighty runagate have I slain. And many there be who deem that no mishap, heathen though I be. Come thou to Utterbol and see for thyself if the days be not changed there; and thou shalt have a belly-full of meat and drink, and honour after thy deserving." So they rested a while, and then went their ways. To Utterbol I went not, but ere I departed to come hither two or three carles strayed my way, as whiles they will, who told me that this which the knight had said was naught but the sooth, and that great was the change of days at Utterbol, whereas all men there, both bond and free, were as merry as they deserved to be, or belike merrier."

Ralph pondered this tale, and was not so sure but that this new lord was not Bull Shockhead, his wartaken thrall; natheless he held his peace; but Ursula said: "I marvel not much at the tale, for sure I am, that had Gandolf of the Bear been slain when I was at Utterbol, neither man nor woman had stirred a finger to avenge him. But all feared him, I scarce know why; and, moreover, there was none to be master if he were gone."

Thereafter she told more tales of the miseries of Utterbol

than Ralph had yet heard, as though this tale of the end of that evil rule had set her free to utter them; and they fell to talking of others matters.

CHAPTER 3

They Winter With the Sage; and Thereafter Come Again to Vale Turris

Thus with no peril and little pain they came to the Sage's hermitage; and whereas the autumn was now wearing, and it was not to be looked for that they should cross even the mountains west of Goldburg, let alone those to the west of Cheaping Knowe, when winter had once set in, Ralph and Ursula took the Sage's bidding to abide the winter through with him, and set forth on their journey again when spring should be fairly come and the mountain ways be clear of snow.

So they dwelt there happily enough; for they helped the Sage in his husbandry, and he enforced him to make them cheer, and read in the ancient book to them, and learned them as much as it behoved them to hearken; and told them tales of past time.

Thereafter when May was at hand they set out on their road, and whereas the Sage knew the wood well, he made a long story short by bringing them to Vale Turris in four days' time. But when they rode down into the dale, they saw the plain meads below the Tower all bright with tents and booths, and much folk moving about amidst them; here and there amidst the roofs of cloth withal was showing the half finished frame of a timber house a-building. But now as they looked and wondered what might be toward, a half score of weaponed men rode up to them and bade them, but courteously, to come with them to see their Lord. The Sage drew forth his let-pass thereat; but the leader of the riders said, as he shook his head: "That is good for thee, father; but these two knights must

needs give an account of themselves: for my lord is minded to put down all lifting throughout his lands; therefore hath he made the meshes of his net small. But if these be thy friends it will be well. Therefore thou art free to come with them and bear witness to their good life."

Here it must be said that since they were on the road again Ursula had donned her wargear once more, and as she rode was to all men's eyes naught but a young and slender knight.

So without more ado they followed those men-at-arms, and saw how the banner of the Bull was now hung out from the Tower; and the sergeants brought them into the midst of the vale, where, about those tents and those half-finished frame-houses (whereof they saw six) was a market toward and much concourse of folk. But the sergeants led through them and the lanes of the booths down to the side of the river, where on a green knoll, with some dozen of men-at-arms and captains about him, sat the new Lord of Utterbol.

Now as the others drew away from him to right and left, the Lord sat before Ralph with naught to hide him, and when their eyes met Ralph gave a cry as one astonished; and the Lord of Utterbol rose up to his feet and shouted, and then fell a laughing joyously, and then cried out: "Welcome, King's Son, and look on me! for though the feathers be fine 'tis the same bird. I am Lord of Utterbol and therewithal Bull Shockhead, whose might was less than thine on the bent of the mountain valley."

Therewith he caught hold of Ralph's hand, and sat himself down and drew Ralph down, and made him sit beside him.

"Thou seest I am become great?" said he. "Yea," said Ralph, "I give thee joy thereof!" Said the new Lord: "Perchance thou wilt be deeming that since I was once thy war-taken thrall I should give myself up to thee: but I tell thee I will not: for I have much to do here. Moreover I did not run away from thee, but thou rannest from me, lad."

Thereat in his turn Ralph fell a laughing, and when he might speak he said: "What needeth the lord of all these spears to beg off his service to the poor wandering knight?"

Then Bull put his arms about him, and said: "I am fain at the sight of thee, time was thou wert a kind lad and a good

master; yet naught so merry as thou shouldest have been; but now I see that gladness plays all about thy face, and sparkles in thine eyes; and that is good. But these thy fellows? I have seen the old carle before: he was dwelling in the wildwood because he was overwise to live with other folk. But this young man, who may he be? Or else—yea, verily, it is a young woman. Yea, and now I deem that it is the thrall of my brother Bull Nosy. Therefore by heritage she is now mine."

Ralph heard the words but saw not the smiling face, so wroth he was; therefore the bare sword was in his fist in a twinkling. But ere he could smite Bull caught hold of his wrist, and said: "Master, master, thou art but a sorry lawyer, or thou wouldst have said: 'Thou art my thrall, and how shall a thrall have heritage?' Dost thou not see that I cannot own her till I be free, and that thou wilt not give me my freedom save for hers? There, now is all the matter of the service duly settled, and I am free and a Lord. And this damsel is free also, and —yea, is she not thy well-beloved, King's Son?"

Ralph was somewhat abashed, and said: "I crave thy pardon, Lord, for misdoubting thee: but think how feeble are we two lovers amongst the hosts of the aliens."

"It is well, it is well," said Bull, "and in very sooth I deem thee my friend; and this damsel was my brother's friend. Sit down, dear maiden, I bid thee; and thou also, O man overwise; and let us drink a cup, and then we will talk about what we may do for each other."

So they sat down all on the grass, and the Lord of Utterbol called for wine, and they drank together in the merry season of May; and the new Lord said: "Here be we friends come together, and it were pity of our lives if we must needs sunder speedily: howbeit, it is thou must rule herein, King's Son; for in my eyes thou art still greater than I, O my master. For I can see in thine eyes and thy gait, and in thine also, maiden, that ye have drunk of the Well at the World's End. Therefore I pray you gently and heartily that ye come home with me to Utterbol."

Ralph shook his head, and answered: "Lord of Utterbol, I bid thee all thanks for thy friendliness, but it may not be."

"But take note," said Bull, "that all is changed there, and it

hath become a merry dwelling of men. We have cast down the Red Pillar, and the White and the Black also; and it is no longer a place of torment and fear, and cozening and murder; but the very thralls are happy and free-spoken. Now come ye, if it were but for a moon's wearing: I shall be there in eight days' time. Yea, Lord Ralph, thou would'st see old acquaintance there withal: for when I slew the tyrant, who forsooth owed me no less than his life for the murder of my brother, I made atonement to his widow, and wedded her: a fair woman at thou wottest, lord, and of good kindred, and of no ill conditions, as is well seen now that she lives happy days. Though I have heard say that while she was under the tyrant she was somewhat rough with her women when she was sad. Eh, fair sir! but is it not so that she cast sheep's eyes on thee, time was, in this same dale?"

Ralph reddened and answered naught; and Bull spake again, laughing: "Yea, so it is: she told me that much herself, and afterwards I heard more from her damsel Agatha, who told me the merry tale of that device they made to catch thee, and how thou brakest through the net. Forsooth, though this she told me not, I deem that she would have had the same gift of thee as her mistress would. Well, lad, lucky are they with whom all women are in love. So now I prithee trust so much in thy luck as to come with me to Utterbol."

Quoth Ralph: "Once again, Lord of Utterbol, we thank thee; but whereas thou hast said that thou hast much to do in this land; even so I have a land where deeds await me. For I stole myself away from my father and mother, and who knows what help they need of me against foemen, and evil days; and now I might give help to them were I once at home, and to the people of the land also, who are a stout-hearted and valiant and kindly folk."

The new Lord's face clouded somewhat, as he said: "If thine heart draweth thee to thy kindred, there is no more to say. As for me, what I did was for kindred's sake, and then what followed after was the work of need. Well, let it be! But since we must needs part hastily, this at least I bid you, that ye abide with me for to-night, and the banquet in the great pavilion. Howsoever ye may be busied, gainsay me not this; and

to-morrow I shall further you on your way, and give you a score of spears to follow thee to Goldburg. Then as for Goldburg and Cheaping Knowe, see ye to it yourselves: but beyond Cheaping Knowe and the plain country, thy name is known, and the likeness of thee told in words; and no man in those mountains shall hurt or hinder thee, but all thou meetest shall aid and further thee. Moreover, at the feast to-night thou shalt see thy friend Otter, and he and I betwixt us shall tell thee how I came to Utterbol, and of the change of days, and how it betid. For he is now my right-hand man, as he was of the dead man. Forsooth, after the slaying I would have had him take the lordship of Utterbol, but he would not, so I must take it perforce or be slain, and let a new master reign there little better than the old. Well then, how sayest thou? Or wilt thou run from me without leave-taking, as thou didst erewhile at Goldburg?"

Ralph laughed at his word, and said that he would not be so churlish this time, but would take his bidding with a good heart; and thereafter they fell to talking of many things. But Ralph took note of Bull, that now his hair and beard were trim and his raiment goodly, for all his rough speech and his laughter and heart-whole gibes and mocking, his aspect and bearing was noble and knightly.

CHAPTER 4

A Feast in the Red Pavilion

So in a while they went with him to the Tower, and there was woman's raiment of the best gotten for Ursula, and afterwards at nightfall they went to the feast in the Red Pavilion of Utterbol, which awhile ago the now-slain Lord of Utterbol, had let make; and it was exceeding rich with broidery of pearl and gems: since forsooth gems and fair women were

what the late lord had lusted for the most, and have them he would at the price of howsoever many tears and groans. But that pavilion was yet in all wise as it was wont to be, saving that the Bull had supplanted the Bear upon the Castle-wall.

Now the wayfarers were treated with all honour and were set upon the high-seat, Ralph upon the right-hand of the Lord, and Ursula upon his left, and the Sage of Swevenham out from her. But on Ralph's right hand was at first a void place, whereto after a while came Otter, the old Captain of the Guard. He came in hastily, and as though he had but just taken his armour off: for his raiment was but such as the men-at-arm of that country were wont to wear under their war-gear, and was somewhat stained and worn; whereas the other knights and lords were arrayed grandly in silks and fine cloth embroidered and begemmed.

Otter was fain when he saw Ralph, and kissed and embraced him, and said: "Forsooth, I saw by thy face, lad, that the world would be soft before thee; and now that I behold thee I know already that thou hast won thy quest; and the Gods only know to what honour thou shalt attain."

Ralph laughed for joy of him, and yet said soberly: "As to honour, meseems I covet little world's goods, save that it may be well with my folk at home." Nevertheless as the words were out of his mouth his thought went back to the tall man whom he had first met at the churchyard gate of Netherton, and it seemed to him that he wished his thriving, yea, and in a lesser way, he wished the same to Roger of the Rope-walk, whereas he deemed that both of these, each in his own way, had been true to the lady whom he had lost.

Then Otter fell a-talking to him of the change of days at Utterbol, and how that it was the Lord's intent that a cheaping town should grow up in the Dale of the Tower, and that the wilderness beyond it should be tilled and builded. "And," said he, "if this be done, and the new lord live to see it, as he may, being but young of years, he may become exceedingly mighty, and if he hold on in the way whereas he now is, he shall be well-beloved also."

So they spake of many things, and there was minstrelsy and

diverse joyance, till at last the Lord of Utterbol stood up and said: "Now bring in the Bull, that we may speak some words over him; for this is a great feast." Ralph wondered what bull this might be whereof he spake; but the harps and fiddlers, and all instruments of music struck up a gay and gallant tune, and presently there came into the hall four men richly attired, who held up on spears a canopy of bawdekin, under which went a man-at-arms helmed, and clad in bright armour, who held in his hands a great golden cup fashioned like to a bull, and he bore it forth unto the dais, and gave it into the hands of the Lord. Then straightway all the noise ceased, and the glee and clatter of the hall, and there was dead silence. Then the Lord held the cup aloft and said in a loud voice:

"Hail, all ye folk! I swear by the Bull, and they that made him, that in three years' time or less I will have purged all the lands of Utterbol of all strong-thieves and cruel tyrants, be they big or little, till all be peace betwixt the mountains and the mark of Goldburg; and the wilderness shall blossom like the rose. Or else shall I die in the pain."

Therewith he drank of the cup, and all men shouted. Then he sat him down and bade hand the cup to Otter; and Otter took the cup and looked into the bowl and saw the wave of wine, and laughed and cried out: "As for me, what shall I swear but that I will follow the Bull through thick and thin, through peace and unpeace, through grief and joy. This is my oath-swearing."

And he drank mightily and sat down.

Then turned the Lord to Ralph and said: "And thou who art my master, wilt thou not tell thy friends and the Gods what thou wilt do?"

"No great matter, belike," said Ralph; "but if ye will it, I will speak out my mind thereon."

"We will it," said the Lord.

Then Ralph arose and took the cup and lifted it and spake: "This I swear, that I will go home to my kindred, yet on the road will I not gainsay help to any that craveth it. So may all Hallows help me!"

Therewith he drank: and Bull said: "This is well said, O happy man! But now that men have drunk well, do ye three

and Otter come with me into the Tower, whereas the chambers are dight for you, that I may make the most of this good day wherein I have met thee again."

So they went with him, and when they had sat down in the goodliest chamber of the Tower, and they had been served with wine and spices, the new Lord said to Ralph: "And now, my master, wilt thou not ask somewhat concerning me?" "Yea," said Ralph, "I will ask thee to tell the tale of how thou camest into thy Lordship." Said the Lord, "This shall ye hear of me with Otter to help me out. Hearken!"

CHAPTER 5

Bull Telleth of His Winning of the Lordship of Utterbol

"When thou rannest away from me, and left me alone at Goldburg, I was grieved; then Clement Chapman offered to take me back with him to his own country, which, he did me to wit, lieth hard by thine: but I would not go with him, since I had an inkling that I should find the slayer of my brother, and be avenged on him. So the Chapmen departed from Goldberg after that Clement had dealt generously by me for thy sake; and when they were gone I bethought me what to do, and thou knowest I can some skill with the fiddle and song, so I betook myself to that craft, both to earn somewhat, and that I might gather tidings and be little heeded; till within awhile folk got to know me well, and would often send for me to their merry-makings, where they gave me fiddler's wages, to wit, meat, drink, and money. So what with one thing what with another I was rich enough to leave Goldburg and fall to my journey unto Utterbol; since I misdoubted me from the first that the caytiff who had slain my brother was the Lord thereof.

"But one day when I went into the market-place I found a

great stir and clutter there; some folk, both men and women, screeching and fleeing, and some running to bows and other weapons. So I caught hold of one of the fleers, and asked him what was toward; and he cried out, 'Loose me! let me go! he is loose, he is loose!'

"'Who is loose, fool?' quoth I. 'The lion,' said he, and therewith in the extremity of his terror tore himself away from me and fled. By this time the others also had got some distance away from me, and I was left pretty much alone. So I went forth on a little, looking about me, and sure enough under one of the pillars of the cloister beneath the market-house (the great green pillar, if thou mindest it), lay crouched a huge yellow lion, on the carcase of a goat, which he had knocked down, but would not fall to eating of amidst all that cry and hubbub.

"Now belike one thing of me thou wottest not, to wit, that I have a gift that wild things love and will do my bidding. The house-mice will run over me as I lie awake looking on them; the small birds will perch on my shoulders without fear; the squirrels and hares will gambol about quite close to me as if I were but a tree; and, withal, the fiercest hound or mastiff is tame before me. Therefore I feared not this lion, and, moreover, I looked to it that if I might tame him thoroughly, he would both help me to live as a jongleur, and would be a sure ward to me.

"So I walked up towards him quietly, till he saw me and half rose up growling; but I went on still, and said to him in a peaceable voice: 'How now, yellow mane! what aileth thee? down with thee, and eat thy meat.' So he sat down to his quarry again, but growled still, and I went up close to him, and said to him: 'Eat in peace and safety, am I not here?' And therewith I held out my bare hand unclenched to him, and he smelt to it, and straightway began to be peaceable, and fell to tearing the goat, and devouring it, while I stood by speaking to him friendly.

"But presently I saw weapons glitter on the other side of the square place, and men with bended bows. The yellow king saw them also, and rose up again and stood growling; then I strove to quiet him, and said, 'These shall not harm thee.'

"Therewith the men cried out to me to come away, for they would shoot: But I called out; 'Shoot not yet! but tell me, does any man own this beast?' 'Yea,' said one, 'I own him, and happy am I that he doth not own me.' Said I, 'Wilt thou sell him?' 'Yea' said he, 'if thou livest another hour to tell down the money.' Said I, 'I am a tamer of wild beasts, and if thou wilt sell this one at such a price, I will rid thee of him.' The man yeasaid this, but kept well aloof with his fellows, who looked on, handling their weapons.

"Then I turned to my new-bought thrall and bade him come with me, and he followed me like a dog to his cage, which was hard by; and I shut him in there, and laid down the money to his owner; and folk came round about, and wondered, and praised me. But I said: 'My masters, have ye naught of gifts for the tamer of beasts, and the deliverer of men?' Thereat they laughed: but they brought me money and other goods, till I had gotten far more than I had given for the lion.

"Howbeit the next day the officers of the Porte came and bade me avoid the town of Goldburg, but gave me more money withal. I was not loth thereto, but departed, riding a little horse that I had, and leading my lion by a chain, though when I was by he needed little chaining.

"So that without more ado I took the road to Utterbol, and wheresoever I came, I had what was to be had that I would; neither did any man fall on me, or on my lion. For though they might have shot him or slain him with many spear-thrusts, yet besides that they feared him sorely, they feared me still more; deeming me some mighty sending from their Gods.

"Thus came I to Utterness, and found it poor and wretched, (as forsooth, it yet is, but shall not be so for long). But the House of Utterbol is exceeding fair and stately (as thou mightest have learned from others, my master,) and its gardens, and orchards, and acres, and meadows as goodly as may be. Yea, a very paradise; yet the dwellers therein as if it were hell, as I saw openly with mine own eyes.

"To be short, the fame of me and my beast had somehow gone before me, and when I came to the House, I was dealt with fairly, and had good entertainment; and this all the more, as the Lord was away for a while, and the life of folk not so

hard by a great way as it had been if he had been there: but the Lady was there in the house, and on the morrow of my coming by her command, I brought my lion before her window and made him come and go, and fetch and carry at my bidding, and when I had done my play she bade me up into her bower, and bade me sit and had me served with wine, while she asked me many questions as to my country and friends, and whence and whither I was; and I answered her with the very sooth, so far as the sooth was handy; and there was with her but one of her women, even thy friend Agatha, fair sir.

"Methought both that this Queen was a fair woman, and that she looked kindly upon me, and at last she said, sighing, that she were well at ease if her baron were even such a man as I, whereas the said Lord was fierce and cruel, and yet a dastard withal. But the said Agatha turned on her, and chided her, as one might with a child, and said: 'Hold thy peace of thy loves and thy hates before a very stranger! Or must I leave yet more of my blood on the pavement of the White Pillar, for the pleasure of thy loose tongue? Come out now, mountain-carle!'

"And she took me by the hand and led me out, and when we had passed the door and it was shut, she turned to me and said: 'Thou, if I hear any word abroad of what my Lady has just spoken, I shall know that thou hast told it, and though I be but a thrall, yea, and of late a mishandled one, yet am I of might enough in Utterbol to compass thy destruction.'

"I laughed in her face and went my ways: and thereafter I saw many folk and showed them my beast, and soon learned two things clearly.

"And first that the Lord and the Lady were now utterly at variance. For a little before he had come home, and found a lack in his household—to wit, how a certain fair woman whom he had but just got hold of, and whom he lusted after sorely, was fled away. And he laid the wyte thereof on his Lady, and threatened her with death: and when he considered that he durst not slay her, or torment her (for he was verily but a dastard), he made thy friend Agatha pay for her under pretence of wringing a true tale out of her.

"Now when I heard this story I said to myself that I should hear that other one of the slaying of my brother, and even so it befell. For I came across a man who told me when and how the Lord came by the said damsel (whom I knew at once could be none other than thou, Lady,) and how he had slain my brother to get her, even as doubtless thou knowest, Lord Ralph.

"But the second thing which I learned was that all folk at Utterbol, men and women, dreaded the home-coming of this tyrant; and that there was no man but would have deemed it a good deed to slay him. But, dastard as he was, use and wont, and the fear that withholdeth rebels, and the doubt that draweth back slaves, saved him; and they dreaded him moreover as a devil rather than a man. Forsooth one of the men there, who looked upon me friendly, who had had tidings of this evil beast drawing near, spake to me a word of warning, and said: 'Friend lion-master, take heed to thyself! For I fear for thee when the Lord cometh home and findeth thee here; lest he let poison thy lion and slay thee miserably afterward.'

"Well, in three days from that word home cometh the Lord with a rout of his spearmen, and some dozen of captives, whom he had taken. And the morrow of his coming, he, having heard of me, sent and bade me showing the wonder of the Man and the Lion; therefore in the bright morning I played with the lion under his window as I had done by the Queen. And after I had played some while, and he looking out of the window, he called to me and said: 'Canst thou lull thy lion to sleep, so that thou mayst leave him for a little? For I would fain have thee up here.'

"I yeasaid that, and chid the beast, and then sang to him till he lay down and slept like a hound weary with hunting. And then I went up into the Lord's chamber; and as it happed, all the while of my playing I had had my short-sword naked in my hand, and thus, I deem without noting it, yet as weird would, I came before the tyrant, where he sat with none anigh him save this Otter and another man-at-arms. But when I saw him, all the blood within me that was come of one mother with my brother's blood stirred within me, and I set my foot on the foot-pace of this murderer's chair, and hove up my short-

sword, and clave his skull, in front and with mine own hand: not as he wrought, not as he wrought with my brother.

"Then I turned about to Otter (who had his sword in his fist when it was too late) till he should speak. Hah Otter, what didst thou say?"

Otter laughed: Quoth he, "I said: thus endeth the worst man in the world. Well done, lion-tamer! thou art no ill guest, and hast paid on the nail for meat, drink and lodging. But what shall we do now? Then thou saidst; 'Well, I suppose thou wilt be for slaying me.' 'Nay,' said I, 'We will not slay thee; at least not for this, nor now, nor without terms.' Thou saidst: 'Perchance then thou wilt let me go free, since this man was ill-beloved: yea, and he owed me a life.' 'Nay, nay,' said I, 'not so fast, good beast-lord.' 'Why not?' saidst thou, 'I can see of thee that thou art a valiant man, and whereas thou hast been captain of the host, and the men-at-arms will lightly do thy bidding, why shouldest thou not sit in the place of this man, and be Lord of Utterbol?'

" 'Nay nay,' said I, 'it will not do, hearken thou rather: For here I give thee the choice of two things, either that thou be Lord of Utterbol, or that we slay thee here and now. For we be two men all-armed.'

"Thou didst seem to ponder it a while, and then saidst at last: 'Well, I set not out on this journey with any such-like intent; yet will I not wrestle with weird. Only I forewarn thee that I shall change the days of Utterbol.'

" 'It will not be for the worst then,' quoth I. 'So now go wake up thy lion, and lead him away to his den: and we will presently send him this carrion for a reward of his jonglery.' 'Gramercy, butcher,' saidst thou, 'I am not for thy flesh-meat to-day. I was forewarned that the poor beast should be poisoned at this man's home-coming, and so will he be if he eat of this dastard; he will not outlive such a dinner.' Thereat we all laughed heartily."

"Yea," said Bull, "So I went to lead away the lion when thou hadst bidden me return in an hours' wearing, when all should be ready for my Lordship. And thou wert not worse than thy word, for when I came into that court again, there were all the men-at-arms assembled, and the free carles, and

the thralls; and the men-at-arms raised me on a shield, set a crowned helm on my head, and thrust a great sword into my hand, and hailed me by the name of the Bull of Utterbol, Lord of the Waste and the Wildwood, and the Mountain-side: and then thou, Otter, wert so simple as to kneel before me and name thyself my man, and take the girding on of sword at my hand. Then even as I was I went in to my Lady and told her the end of my tale, and in three minutes she lay in my arms, and in three days in my bed as my wedded wife. As to Agatha, when I had a little jeered her, I gave her rich gifts and good lands, and freedom, to boot her for her many stripes. And lo there, King's Son and Sweet Lady, the end of all my tale."

"Yea," quoth Otter, "saving this, that even already thou has raised up Utterbol from Hell to Earth, and yet meseemeth thou hast good-will to raise it higher."

Bull reddened at his word, and said: "Tush, man! praise the day when the sun has set." Then he turned to Ralph, and said: "Yet couldst thou at whiles put in a good word for me here and there amongst the folks that thou shalt pass through on thy ways home, I were fain to know that I had a well-speaking friend abroad." "We shall do no less," said Ralph; and Ursula spake in like wise.

So they talked together merrily a while longer, till night began to grow old, and then went to their chambers in all content and good-liking.

CHAPTER 6

They Ride From Vale Turris. Redhead Tells of Agatha

On the morrow when they arose, Ralph heard the sound of horses and the clashing of arms: he went to the window, and looked out, and saw how the spears stood up thick together at the Tower's foot, and knew that these were the men who were

to be his fellows by the way. Their captain he saw, a big man all-armed in steel, but himseemed that he knew his face under his sallet, and presently saw that it was Redhead. He was glad thereof, and clad himself hastily, and went out a-doors, and went up to him and hailed him, and Redhead leapt off his horse, and cast his arms about Ralph, and made much of him, and said: "It is good for sore eyes to see thee, lord; and I am glad at heart that all went well with thee that time. Although, forsooth, there was guile behind it. Yet whereas I wotted nothing thereof, which I will pray thee to believe, and whereas thou hast the gain of all, I deem thou mayst pardon me."

Said Ralph: "Thou hast what pardon of me thou needest; so be content. For the rest, little need is there to ask if thou thrivest, for I behold thee glad and well honoured."

As they spoke came the Lord forth from the Tower, and said: "Come thou, Lord Ralph, and eat with us ere thou takest to the road; I mean with Otter and me. As for thee, Redhead, if aught of ill befall this King's Son under thy way-leading, look to it that thou shalt lose my good word with Agatha; yea, or gain my naysay herein; whereby thou shalt miss both fee and fair dame."

Redhead looked sheepishly on Ralph at that word, yet winked at him also, as if it pleased him to be jeered concerning his wooing; so that Ralph saw how the land lay, and that the guileful handmaid was not ill content with that big man. So he smiled kindly on him and nodded, and went back with Bull into the Tower. There they sat down all to meat together; and when they were done with their victual, Bull spake, and said to Ralph: "Fair King's Son, is this then the last sight of thee? wilt thou never come over the mountains again?" Said Ralph: "Who knoweth? I am young yet, and have drunk of the Water of the Well." Bull grew somewhat pensive and said: "Yea, thou meanest that thou mayest come back and find me no longer here. Yet if thou findest but my grave-mound, yet mayhappen thou shalt come on something said or sung of me, which shall please thee. For I will tell thee, that thou hast changed my conditions; how, I wot not."

"Thy word is good," said Ralph, "yet I meant not that; never should I come to Utterbol if I looked not to find thee

living there." Bull smiled on him as though he loved him, and said: "This is well spoken; I shall look to see thee before I die."

Then said Ursula: "Lord of Utterbol, this also thou mayst think on, that it is no further from Utterbol to Upmeads than from Upmeads to Utterbol." The Lord laughed and said: "Sooth is that; and were but my Bull here, as I behold you I should be of mind to swear by him to come and see you at Upmeads ere ten years have worn."

Then she put forth her hand and said: "Swear by this!" So he took it and swore the oath; but the Sage of Swevenham said: "This oath thou shalt keep to the gain and not the loss both of thee and of thy friends of Upmeads."

Thus were they fain of each other, and Ralph saw how Bull's heart was grown big, and he rejoiced thereat. But anon he arose and said: "Now, Lord, we ask leave to depart, for the way is long, and mayhappen my kindred now lack a man's helping. Then Bull stood up and called for his horse, and Otter also, and they all went forth and gat a-horseback and rode away from Vale Turris, and Redhead rode behind them humbly, till it was noon and they made stay for meat. Then after they had broken bread together and drunk a cup, Bull and Otter kissed the wayfarers, and bade them farewell, and so rode back to Vale Turris, and Ralph and Ursula and the Sage tarried not but rode on their ways.

But anon Ralph called to Redhead, and bade him ride beside them that they might talk together, and he came up with them, and Ursula greeted him kindly, and they were merry one with another. And Ralph said to Redhead: "Friend captain, thou art exceeding in humility not to ride with the Lord or Captain Otter; save for chance-hap, I see not that thou art worser than they."

Redhead grinned, and said: "Well, as to Otter, that is all true; but as for Lord Bull it is another matter; I wot not but his kindred may be as good or better than any in these east parts. In any case, he hath his kin and long descent full often in his mouth, while I am but a gangrel body. Howbeit it is all one, whereas whatso he or Otter bid any man to do, he doeth it, but my bidding may be questioned at whiles. And

look you, lord, times are not ill, so wherefore should I risk a change of days? Sooth to say, both these great lords have done well by me."

Ralph laughed: "And better will they do, as thou deemest; give thee Agatha, to wit?" "Yea, fair sir," quoth Redhead. "No great gift, that seemeth to me, for thy valiancy," said Ralph; "she is guileful enough and loose enough for a worse man than thee."

"Lord," said Redhead, "even of her thou shalt say what pleaseth thee; but no other man shall say of her what pleaseth me not. For all that is come and gone she is true and valiant, and none may say that she is not fair and sweet enough for a better man than me; and my great good luck it is that, as I hope, she looketh no further for a better."

Ursula said: "Is it so, perchance, that now she is free and hath naught to fear, she hath no need for guile?" "Hail to thee for thy word, lady," quoth Redhead; and then he was silent, glooming somewhat on Ralph.

But Ralph said: "Nay, my friend, I meant no harm, but I was wondering what had befallen to bring you two so close together."

"It was fear and pain, and the helping of each other that wrought it," said Redhead. Said Ursula: "Good Captain, how was it that she escaped the uttermost of evil at the tyrant's hands? since from all that I have heard, it must needs be that he laid the blame on her (working for her mistress) of my flight from Utterbol."

"Even so it was, lady," said Redhead; "but, as thou wottest belike, she had got is spread abroad that she was cunning in sorcery, and that her spell would not end when her life ended; nay, that he to whom her ghost should bear ill-will, and more especially such an one as might compass her death, should have but an ill time of it while he lived, which should not be long. This tale, which, sooth to say, I myself helped to spread, the Lord of Utterbol trowed in wholly, so cunningly was it told; so that, to make a long story short, he feared her, and feared her more dead than living. So that when he came home, and found thee gone, lady, he did indeed deem that thy flight was of Agatha's contrivance. And this the more because his

nephew (he whom thou didst beguile; I partly guess how) told him a made-up tale how all was done by the spells of Agatha. For this youth was of all men, not even saving his uncle, most full of malice; and he hated Agatha, and would have had her suffer the uttermost of torments and he to be standing by the while; howbeit his malice overshot itself, since his tale made her even more of a witch than the lord deemed before.

"Yea," said Ursula, "and what hath befallen that evil young man, Captain?" Said Redhead: "It is not known to many, lady; but two days before the slaying of his uncle, I met him in a wood a little way from Utterbol, and, the mood being on me I tied him neck and heels and cast him, with a stone round his neck, into a deep woodland pool hight the Ram's Bane, which is in that same wood. Well, as to my tale of Agatha. When the lord came home first, he sent for her, and his rage had so mastered his fear for a while that his best word was scourge and rack and faggot; but she was, outwardly, so calm and cold, smiling on him balefully, that he presently came to himself, a found that fear was in his belly, and that he might not do what he would with her; wherefore he looked to it that however she were used (which was ill enough, God wot!) she should keep the soul in her body. And at last the fear so mounted into his head that he made peace with her, and even craved forgiveness of her and gave her gifts. She answered him sweetly indeed, yet so as he (and all others who were bystanding, of whom I was one,) might well see that she deemed she owed him a day in harvest. As for me, he heeded me naught, and I lay low all I might. And in any wise we wore the time till the great day of deliverance."

Therewith dropped the talk about Agatha, when they had bidden him all luck in his life. Forsooth, they were fain of his words, and of his ways withal. For he was a valiant man, and brisk, and one who forgat no benefit, and was trusty as steel; merry-hearted withal, and kind and ready of speech despite his uplandish manners, which a life not a little rude had thrust on him.

CHAPTER 7

Of Their Riding the Waste, and of a Battle Thereon

They slept in no house that night nor for many nights after; for they were now fairly on the waste. They bore with them a light tent for Ursula's lodging benights, and the rest of them slept on the field as they might; or should they come to a thicket or shaw, they would lodge them there softly. Victual and drink failed them not, for they bore what they needed on sumpter-horses, and shot some venison on the way withal. They saw but few folk; for the most part naught save a fowler of the waste, or a peat-cutter, who stood to look on the men-at-arms going by, and made obeisance to the token of Utterbol.

But on a time, the fifth day of their journey, they saw, in the morning, spears not a few standing up against a thicket-side in the offing. Redhead looked under the sharp of his hand, and laughed as though he were glad, and said: "I know not clearly what these may be, but it looketh like war. Now, knight, this is best to do: hold with thee three of our best men, so that ye may safe guard the Lady, and I with the others will prick on and look into this."

"Nay," said Ralph, "thou mayst yet be apaid of a man's aid; and if there be strokes on sale in the cheaping-stead yonder, I will deal along with thee. Leave thy three men with the Lady, and let us on; we shall soon be back."

"Nay once more, dear lord," quoth Ursula, "I fear to be left alone of thee, and it is meet that thou free me from fear. I will ride with you, but three horse-lengths behind, so as not to hinder you. I have been worse bestead than this shall be."

"It is good," quoth Redhead, "let her ride with us: for why should she suffer the pain of fear in the lonely waste? But let

her do on a hauberk over her coats, and steel coif over her head, for shaft and bolt will ofttimes go astray."

Even so they did, and rode forward, and presently they saw the spearmen that they were somewhat more than their company, and that they were well mounted on black horses and clad in black armour. Then they drew rein for awhile and Redhead scanned them again and said: "Yea, these are the men of the brother of thy hot wooer, Lady Ursula, whom I cooled in the Ram's Bane, but a man well nigh as old as his uncle, though he hath not made men tremble so sore, albeit he be far the better man, a good warrior, a wise leader, a reiver and lifter well wrought at all points. Well, 'tis not unlike that we shall have to speak to his men again, either out-going or home-coming: so we had best kill as many of these as we may now. Do on thy sallet, my lord; and thou, Michael-a-green, shake out the Bull; and thou, our Noise, blow a point of war, that they may be warned. God to aid! but they be ready and speedy!"

In sooth even as the pennon of the Bull ran down the wind, and the Utterbol horn was winded, the Black men-at-arms came on at a trot, and presently with a great screeching yell cast their spears into the rest, and spurred on all they might, while a half score of bowmen who had come out of the thicket bent their bows and fell a-shooting. But now the men of Utterbol spurred to meet the foe, and as Redhead cast his spear into the rest, he said to Ralph: "Glad am I that thy Lady is anear to see me, for now I worship her."

Therewith the two bands met, and whereas on neither side was the armour very stout, some men of either band were hurt or slain at once with spearthrust; though, save for Ralph, they did not run straight on each other; but fenced and foined with their spears deftly enough. As for Ralph, he smote a tall man full on the breast and pierced him through and through, and then pulled out the Upmeads blade and smote on the right hand and the left, so that none came anigh him willingly.

Shortly to say it, in five minutes' time the Black Riders were fleeing all over the field with them of Utterbol at their heels, and the bowmen ran back again into the wood. But one of the foemen as he fled cast a javelin at a venture, and who

should be before it save Ursula, so that she reeled in her saddle, and would have fallen downright but for one of the Utterbol fellows who stayed her, and got her gently off her horse. This Ralph saw not, for he followed far in the chase, and was coming back somewhat slowly along with Redhead, who was hurt, but not sorely. So when he came up, and saw Ursula sitting on the grass with four or five men about her, he sickened for fear; but she rose up and came slowly and pale-faced to meet him, and said: "Fear not, beloved, for steel kept out steel: I have no scratch or point or edge on me." So therewith he kissed her, and embraced her, and was glad.

The Utterbol Riders had slain sixteen of their foemen; for they took none to mercy, and four of their band were slain outright, and six hurt, but not grievously. So they tarried awhile on the field of deed to rest them and tend their wounded men, and so rode on again heedfully.

But Redhead spake: "It is good to see thee tilting, King's Son. I doubt me I shall never learn thy downright thrust. Dost thou remember how sorry a job I made of it, when we met in the lists at Vale Turris that other day?"

"Yea, yea," said Ralph. "Thou were best let that flea stick on the wall. For to-day, at least, I have seen thee play at sharps deftly enough."

Quoth Redhead: "Lord, it is naught, a five minutes' scramble. That which trieth a man, is to fight and overcome, and straight have to fight with fresh foemen, and yet again, till ye long for dark night to cover you—yea, or even death."

"Warrior-like and wisely thou speakest," said Ralph; "and whoever thou servest thou shalt serve well. And now once more I would it were me."

Redhead shook his head at that word, and said: "I would it might be so; but it will not be so as now."

Forth on they rode, and slept in a wood that night, keeping good watch; but saw no more of the Black Riders for that time.

On a day thereafter when it was nigh evening, Ralph looked about, and saw a certain wood on the edge of a plain, and he stayed Ursula, and said: "Look round about, beloved; for this is the very field whereas I was betrayed into the hands of the

men of Utterbol." She smiled on him and said: "Let me light down then, that I may kiss the earth of that kind field, where thou wert not stayed over long, but even long enough that we might meet in the dark wood thereafter."

"Sweetling," said Ralph, "this mayst thou do and grieve no man, not even for a little. For lo you! the captain is staying the sumpter-beasts, and it is his mind, belike, that we shall sleep in yonder wood to-night." Therewith he lighted down and she in likewise: then he took her by the hand and led her on a few yards, and said: "Lo, beloved, this quicken-tree; hereby it was that the tent was pitched wherein I lay the night when I was taken."

She looked on him shyly and said: "Wilt thou not sleep here once more to-night?"

"Yea, well-beloved," said he, "I will bid them pitch thy tent on this same place, that I may smell the wild thyme again, as I did that other while."

So there on the field of his ancient grief they rested that night in all love and content.

CHAPTER 8

Of Goldburg Again, and the Queen Thereof

Next day they went forth through the country wherethrough Morfinn had led Ralph into captivity; and Redhead rode warily; for there were many passes which looked doubtful: but whether the ill men feared to meddle with them, or however it were, none waylaid them, and they all came safely to the gate of Goldburg, the towers whereof were full of folk looking forth on them. So they displayed their pennon, and rode into the street, where folk pressed about them in friendly wise; for the new Lord of Utterbol had made firm and fast peace with Goldburg. So they rode to the hostel, and gat them

victual, and rested in peace that night. But Ralph wondered whether the Queen would send for him when she heard of his coming back again, and he hoped that she would let him be; for he was ashamed when he thought of her love for him, and how that he had clean forgotten her till he was close to Goldburg again.

But when morning was come Ralph spake to Redhead and asked him how he should do to wage men for the homeward journey on thence; and Redhead said: "I have already seen the Clerk of the Porte, and he will be here in an hour with the license for thee to wage men to go with thee to Cheaping Knowe. As for me, I must needs go see the King, and give him a letter sealed by my lord's hand; and when I come back from him, I will go round to the alehouses which be haunted of the men-at-arms to see after strong carles for thine avail. But to the King hast thou no need to go, save he send for thee, whereas thou art not come hither to chaffer, and he needeth not men of war."

Ralph stared at him and said: "The King, sayst thou? is there no Queen of Goldburg?" Said Redhead: "There is the King's wedded wife, but her they call not Queen, but Lady." "But the Queen that was," said Ralph, "where is she then?" "Yea truly," said Redhead, "a Queen sat alone as ruler here a while ago; but whether she died, or what befell her, I know nothing. I had little to do with Goldburg till our lord conquered Utterbol. Lo here the host! he may tell thee the tale thereof."

Therewith he departed, and left Ralph with the host, whom Ralph questioned of the story, for his heart was wrung lest such a fair woman and so friendly should have come to harm.

So the host sat down by Ralph and said: "My master, this is a tale which is grievous to us: for though the saints forbid I should say a word against my lord that is now, nor is there any need to, yet we deemed us happy to be under so dear a lady and so good and fair as she was. Well, she is gone so that we wot not whether she be living or dead. For so it is that in the early spring, somewhat more than a year ago that is, one morning when folk arose, the Queen's place was empty. Riding and running there was about and about, but none the more was

she found. Forsooth as time wore, tales were told of what wise she left us, and why: but she was gone. Well, fair sir, many deemed that though her lineage was known by seeming, yet she was of the fairy, and needed neither steed nor chariot to go where she would. But her women and those that knew her best, deemed that whatso she were, she had slain herself, as they thought, for some unhappiness of love. For indeed she had long gone about sad and distraught, though she neither wept, nor would say one word of her sorrow, whatsoever it might be.

"But, fair sir, since thou art a stranger, and art presently departing from our city, I will tell thee a thing. To wit; one month or so after she had vanished away, I held talk with a certain old fisherman of our water, and he told me that on that same night of her vanishing, as he stood on the water-side handing the hawser of his barque, and the sail was all ready to to be sheeted home, there came along the shore a woman going very swiftly, who, glancing about her, as if to see that there was none looking on or prying, came up to him, and prayed him in a sweet voice for instant passage down the water. Wrapped she was in a dark cloak and a cowl over her head, but as she put forth her hand to give him gold, he saw even by the light of his lantern that it was exceeding fair, and that great gems flashed from the finger-rings, and that there was a great gold ring most precious on her arm.

"He yeasaid her asking, partly because of her gold, partly (as he told me) that he feared her, deeming her to be of the fairy. Then she stepped over his gangway of one board on to his boat, and as he held the lantern low down to light her, lest she should make a false step and fall into the water, he noted (quoth he) that a golden shoe all begemmed came out from under gown-hem and that the said hem was broidered thickly with pearl and jewels.

"Small was his barque, and he alone with the woman, and there was a wind in the March night, and the stream is swift betwixt the quays of our city; so that by night and cloud they made much way down the water, and at sunrise were sailing through the great wood which lieth hence a twenty leagues seaward. So when the sun was risen she stood up in the fore

part of the boat, and bade him turn the barque toward the shore, and even as the bows ran upon the sand, she leapt out and let the thicket cover her; nor have any of Goldburg seen her since, or the Queen. But for my part I deem the woman to have been none other than the Queen. Seest thou then! she is gone: but the King Rainald her cousin reigns in her stead, a wise man, and a mighty, and no tyrant or skinner of the people."

Ralph heard and pondered, and was exceeding sorry, and more had he been but for the joyousness which came of the Water of the Well. Howbeit he might not amend it: for even were he to seek for the Queen and find her, it might well be worse than letting it be. For he knew (when he thought of her) that she loved him, and how would it be if she might not outwear her love, or endure the days of Goldburg, and he far away? This he said to himself, which he might not have said to any other soul.

CHAPTER 9

They Come to Cheaping Knowe Once More. Of the King Thereof

Toward evening comes Redhead, and tells Ralph how he hired him a dozen men-at-arms to follow him well-weaponed to Cheaping Knowe: withal he counselled him to take a good gift with him to that same town to buy the good will of the King there; who was a close-fist and a cruel lord.

Afterwards they sat together in the court of that fair house before good wine, Ralph and Ursula, and Redhead and the Sage of Swevenham, and spake of many things, and were merry and kind together. But on the morrow Redhead departed from Goldburg with his men, and he loth to depart, and they gave him farewell lovingly. Thereafter Ralph's new men came to him in the hostelry, and he feasted them and

did well to them, so that they praised him much. Then he gat him victuals and sumpter-horses for the journey, and bought good store of bows and arrows withal. Furthermore he took heed to Redhead's word and bought a goodly gift of silver vessel and fine cloth for the King of Cheaping Knowe.

The day after he and his company departed from Goldburg toward the mountains, which they passed unfought and unwaylaid: partly because they were a band of stout men, and partly because a little before there had been a great overthrow of the wild men of those mountains at the hands of the men of Goldburg and the Chapmen; so that now the mountain-men lay close, and troubled none that rode with any force.

On the way they failed not to pass by the place where they had erst found Bull Nosy slain: there they saw his howe, heaped up exceeding high, covered in with earth, whereon the grass was now beginning to grow, and with a great standing stone on the top thereof, whereon was graven the image of a bull, with a sword thereunder; whereby the wayfarers wotted that this had been done in his memory by his brother, the new Lord of Utterbol.

So they came down out of the mountains to Whiteness, where they had good entertainment, but tarried not save for one night, riding their ways betimes to Cheaping Knowe: and they came before the gate thereof safe and sound on the third day; and slept in the hostelry of the chapmen. On the morrow Ralph went up to the King's Castle with but three men unweaponed bearing the gift which he had got for the King. Albeit he sent not away his men-at-arms till he should know how the King was minded towards him.

As he went he saw in the streets sad tokens of the lord's cruel justice, as handless men, fettered, dragging themselves about, and folk hung up before chapmen's booths, and whipping-cheer, and the pillar, and such like. But whereas he might not help he would not heed, but came right to the Castle-gate, and entered easily when he had told his errand, for gift-bearing men are not oftenest withstood.

He was brought straightway into the great hall, where sat the King on his throne amidst the chiefs of the Porte, and his

captains and sergeants, who were, so to say, his barons, though they were not barons of lineage, but masterful men who were wise to do his bidding.

As he went up the hall he saw a sort of poor caytiffs, women as well as men, led away from the high-place in chains by bailiffs and tipstaves; and he doubted not that these were for torments or maiming and death; and thought it were well might he do them some good.

Being come to the King, he made his obeisance to him, and craved his good will and leave to wage men-at-arms to bring him through the mountains.

The King was a tall man, a proper man of war; long-legged, black bearded, and fierce-eyed. Some word he had heard of Ralph's gift, therefore he was gracious to him; he spake and said: "Thou hast come across the mountains a long way, fair Sir; prithee on what errand?" Answered Ralph: "For no errand, lord, save to fare home to mine own land." "Where is thine own land?" said the King, stretching out his legs and lying back in his chair. "West-away, lord, many a mile," said Ralph. "Yea," quoth the King, "and how far didst thou go beyond the mountains? As far as Utterbol?" Said Ralph: "Yet further, but not to Utterbol." "Hah!" said the King, "who goeth beyond Utterbol must have a great errand; what was thine?"

Ralph thought for a moment, and deemed it best to say as little as he might concerning Ursula; so he answered, and his voice grew loud and bold: "I was minded to drink a draught of the WELL at the WORLD'S END, and even so I did." As he spake, he drew himself up, and his brows were knit a little, but his eyes sparkled from under them, and his cheeks were bright and rosy. He half drew the sword from the scabbard, and sent it back rattling, so that the sound of it went about the hall; he upreared his head and looked around him on this and that one of the warriors of the aliens, and he sniffed the air into his nostrils as he stood alone amongst them, and set his foot down hard on the floor of the King's hall, and his armour rattled upon him.

But the King sat bolt upright in his chair and stared Ralph's face; and the warriors and lords and merchants fell

back from Ralph and stood in an ordered rank on either side of him and bent their heads before him. None spoke till the King said in a hoarse voice, but lowly and wheedling: "Tell us, fair Sir, what is it that we can do to pleasure thee?"

"King," said Ralph, "I am not here to take gifts but to give them rather: yet since thou biddest me I will crave somewhat of thee, that thou mayst be the more content: and moreover the giving shall cost thee nothing: I crave of thee to give me life and limb and freedom for the poor folk whom I saw led down the hall by thy tipstaves, even now. Give me that or nothing." The King scowled, but he spake: "This is indeed a little gift of thee to take; yet to none else save thee had I given it."

Therewith he spake to a man beside him and said: "Go thou, set them free, and if any hurt hath befallen them thy life shall answer for it. Is it enough, fair Sir, and have we thy goodwill?" Ralph laughed for joy of his life and his might, and he answered: "King, this is the token of my goodwill; fear naught of me." And he turned to his men, and bade them bright forth the gift of Goldburg and open it before the King; and they did so. But when the King cast eyes on the wares his face was gladdened, for he was a greedy wolf, and whoso had been close to his mouth would have heard him mutter: "So mighty! yet so wealthy!" But he thanked Ralph aloud and in smooth words. And Ralph made obeisance to him again, and then turned and went his ways down the hall, and was glad at heart that he had become so mighty a man, for all fell back before him and looked on him with worship. Howbeit he had looked on the King closely and wisely, and deemed that he was both cruel and guileful, so that he rejoiced that he had spoken naught of Ursula, and he was minded to keep her within gates all the while they abode at Cheaping-Knowe.

When he came to the hostel he called his men-at-arms together and asked them how far they would follow him, and with one voice they said all that they would go with him whereso he would, so that it were not beyond reason. So they arrayed them for departure on the morrow, and were to ride out of gates about mid-morning. So wore the day to evening;

but ere the night was old came a man asking for Ralph, as one who would have a special alms of him, a poor man by seeming, and evilly clad. But when Ralph was alone with him, the poor man did him to wit that for all his seeming wretchedness he was but disguised, and was in sooth a man of worship, and one of the Porte. Quoth he: "I am of the King's Council, and I must needs tell thee a thing of the King: that though he was at the first overawed and cowed by the majesty of thee, a Friend of the Well, he presently came to himself, which was but ill; so that what for greed, what for fear even, he is minded to send men to waylay thee, some three leagues from the town, on your way to the mountains, but ye shall easily escape his gin now I have had speech of thee; for ye may take a by-road and fetch a compass of some twelve miles, and get aback of the waylayers. Yet if ye escape this first ambush, unless ye are timely in riding early tomorrow it is not unlike that he shall send swift riders to catch up with you ere ye come to the mountains. Now I am come to warn thee hereof, partly because I would not have so fair a life spilt, which should yet do so well for the sons of Adam, and partly also because I would have a reward of thee for my warning and my wayleading, for I shall show thee the way and the road."

Said Ralph: "Ask and fear not; for if I may trust thee I already owe thee a reward." "My name is Michael-a-dale," said the man, "and from Swevenham I came hither, and fain would I go thither, and little hope I have thereof save I go privily in some such band as thine, whereas the tyrant holdeth me on pain, as well I know, of an evil death."

"I grant thine asking, friend," said Ralph; "and now thou wert best go to thine house and truss what stuff thou mayst have with thee and come back hither in the grey of the morning."

The man shook his head and said: "Nay; here must I bide night-long, and go out of gates amongst thy men-at-arms, and clad like one of them with iron enough about me to hide the fashion of me; it were nowise safe for me to go back into the town; for this tyrant wages many a spy: yea, forsooth, I fear me by certain tokens that it is not all so certain that I

have not been spied upon already, and that it is known that I have come to thee. And I will tell thee that by hook or by crook the King already knoweth somewhat of thee and of the woman who is in thy company."

Ralph flushed red at that word, and felt his heart bound: but even therewith came into them the Sage; and straightway Ralph took him apart and told him on what errand the man was come, and ask him if he deemed him trusty. Then the Sage went up to Michael and looked him hard in the face awhile, and then said: "Yea, honest he is unless the kindred of Michael of the Hatch of Swevenham have turned thieves in the third generation."

"Yea," said Michael, "and dost thou know the Hatch?"

"As I know mine own fingers," said the Sage; "and even so I knew it years and years before thou wert born." Therewith he told the new-comer what he was, and the two men of Swevenham made joy of each other. And Ralph was fain of them, and went into the chamber wherein sat Ursula, and told her how all things were going, and she said that she would be naught but glad to leave that town, which seemed to her like to Utterbol over again.

CHAPTER 10

An Adventure on the Way to the Mountains

On the morrow Ralph got his men together betimes and rode out a-gates, and was little afraid that any should meddle with him within the town or anigh it, and even so it turned out. But Michael rode in the company new clad, and with his head and face all hidden in a wide sallet. As for Ralph and Ursula, they were exceeding glad, and now that their heads were turned to the last great mountains, it seemed to them that they were verily going home, and they longed for the

night, that they might be alone together, and talk of all these matters in each others' arms.

When they were out a-gates, they rode for two miles along the highway, heedlessly enough by seeming, and then, as Michael bade, turned suddenly into a deep and narrow lane, and forth on, as it led betwixt hazelled banks and coppices of small wood, skirting the side of the hills, so that it was late in the afternoon before they came into the Highway again, which was the only road leading into the passes of the mountains. Then said Michael that now by all likelihood they had beguiled the waylayers for that time; so they went on merrily till half the night was worn, when they shifted for lodging in a little oak-wood by the wayside. There they lay not long, but were afoot betimes in the morning, and rode swiftly daylong, and lay down at night on the wayside with the less dread because they were come so far without hurt.

But on the third day, somewhat after noon, when they were come up above the tilled upland and the land was rough and the ways steep, there lay before them a dark wood swallowing up the road. Thereabout Ralph deemed that he saw weapons glittering ahead, but was not sure, for as clear-sighted as he was. So he stayed his band, and had Ursula into the rearward, and bade all men look to their weapons, and then they went forward heedfully and in good order, and presently not only Ralph, but all of them could see men standing in the jaws of the pass with the wood on either side of them, and though at first they doubted if these were aught but mere strong-thieves, such as any wayfarers might come on, they had gone but a little further when Michael knew them for the riders of Cheaping Knowe. "Yea," said the Sage of Swevenham, "it is clear how it has been: when they found that we came not that first morning, they had an inkling of what had befallen, and went forward toward the mountains, and not back to Cheaping Knowe, and thus outwent us while we were fetching that compass to give them the go-by: wherefore I deem that some great man is with them, else had they gone back to town for new orders."

"Well," said Ralph, "then will they be too many for us; so now will I ride ahead and see if we may have peace." Said

the Sage, "Yea, but be wary, for thou hast to do with the guileful."

Then Ralph rode on alone till he was come within hail of those waylayers. Then he thrust his sword into the sheath, and cried out: "Will any of the warriors in the wood speak with me; for I am the captain of the wayfarers?"

Then rode out from those men a very tall man, and two with him, one on either side, and he threw back the sallet from his face, and said: "Wayfarer, all we have weapons in our hands, and we so many that thou and thine will be in regard of us as the pips to the apple. Wherefore, yield ye!" Quoth Ralph: "Unto whom then shall I yield me?" Said the other: "To the men of the King of Cheaping Knowe." Then spake Ralph: "What will ye do with us when we are yolden? Shall we not pay ransom and go our ways?" "Yea," said the tall man, "and this is the ransom: that ye give up into my hands my dastard who hath bewrayed me, and the woman who wendeth in your company."

Ralph laughed; for by this time he knew the voice of the King, yea, and the face of him under his sallet. So he cried back in answer, and in such wise as if the words came rather from his luck than from his youth: "Ho, Sir King! beware, beware! lest thou tremble when thou seest the bare blade of the Friend of the Well more than thou trembledst erst, when the blade was hidden in the sheath before the throne of thine hall."

But the King cried out in a loud harsh voice. "Thou, young man, beware thou! and try not thy luck overmuch. We are as many as these trees, and thou canst not prevail over us. Go thy ways free, and leave me what thou canst not help leaving."

"Yea, fool," cried Ralph, "and what wilt thou do with these two?"

Said the King: "The traitor I will flay, and the woman I will bed."

Scarce were the words out of his mouth ere Ralph gave forth a great cry and drew his sword, set spurs to his horse, and gallopped on up the road with all his band at his back, for they had drawn anigh amidst this talk. But or ever they

came on the foemen, they heard a great confused cry of onset mingled with affright, and lo! the King threw up his arms, and fell forward on his horse's neck with a great arrow through his throat.

Ralph drave on sword in hand, crying out, "Home, home to Upmeads!" and anon was amidst of the foe smiting on either hand. His men followed, shouting: "Ho, for the Friend of the Well!" And amongst the foemen, who were indeed very many, was huge dismay, so that they made but a sorry defence before the band of the wayfarers, who knew not what to make of it, till they noted that arrows and casting-spears were coming out of the wood on either side, which smote none of them, but many of the foemen. Short was the tale, for in a few minutes there were no men of the foe together save those that were fleeing down the road to Cheaping Knowe.

Ralph would not suffer his men to follow the chase, for he wotted not with whom he might have to deal besides the King's men. He drew his men together and looked round for Ursula, and saw that the Sage had brought her up anigh him, and there she sat a-horseback, pale and panting with the fear of death and joy of deliverance.

Now Ralph cried out from his saddle in a loud voice, and said: "Ho ye of the arrows of the wood! ye have saved me from my foemen; where be ye, and what be ye?" Came a loud voice from out of the wood on the right hand: "Children, tell the warrior whose sons ye be!" Straightway brake out a huge bellowing on either side of the road, as though the wood were all full of great neat.

Then cried out Ralph: "If ye be of the kindred of the Bull, ye will belike be my friends rather than my foes. Or have ye heard tell of Ralph of Upmeads? Now let your captain come forth and speak with me."

Scarce were the words out of his mouth ere a man came leaping forth from out the wood, and stood before Ralph in the twilight of the boughs, and Ralph noted of him that he was clad pretty much like to Bull Shockhead of past time, save that he had a great bull's head for a helm (which

afterwards Ralph found out was of iron and leather) and a great gold ring on his arm.

Then Ralph thrust his sword back into the sheath, and his folk handled their weapons peaceably, while Ralph hailed the new-comer as Lord or Duke of the Bulls.

"Belike," quoth the said chieftain, "thou wouldst wish to show me some token, whereby we may wot that thou art that Friend of the Well and of our kinsman concerning whom he sent us a message."

Then Ralph bethought him of the pouch with the knot of grass therein which Bull Shockhead had given him at Goldburg; so he drew it out, and gave it into the hand of the chieftain, who no sooner caught a glimpse thereof than he said: "Verily our brother's hand hath met thine when he gave thee this. Yet forsooth, now that I look on thee, I may say that scarce did I need token to tell me that thou wert the very man. For I can see thee, that thou art of great honour and worship, and thou didst ride boldly against the foemen when thou knewest not that we had waylaid thy waylayers. Now I wot that there is no need to ask thee whether thou wouldst get thee out of our mountains by the shortest road, yet wilt thou make it little longer, and somewhat safer, if ye will suffer us to lead thee by way of our dwelling." So Ralph yeasaid his bidding without more words.

As they spake thus together the road both above and below was become black with weaponed men, and some of Ralph's band looked on one another, as though they doubted their new friends somewhat. But the Sage of Swevenham spoke to them and bade them fear nought. "For," said he, "so far as we go, who are now their friends, there is no guile in these men." The Bull captain heard him and said: "Thou sayest sooth, old man; and I shall tell thee that scarce had a band like thine come safe through the mountains, save by great good luck, without the leave of us; for the fool with the crown that lieth there dead had of late days so stirred up the Folks of the Fells through his grimness and cruelty that we have been minded to stop everything bigger than a cur-dog that might seek to pass by us, for at least so long as yonder

rascal should live. But ye be welcome; so now let us to the road, for the day weareth."

So the tribesmen gat them into order, and their Duke went on the left side of Ralph, while Ursula rode on his right hand. The Duke and all his men were afoot, but they went easily and swiftly, as wolves trot. As for the slain of the waylayers, of whom there were some threescore, the Bull captain would do nought but let them lie on the road. "For," said he, "there be wolves and lynxes enough in the wood, and the ravens of the uplands, and the kites shall soon scent the carrion. They shall have burial soon enough. Neither will we meddle with it; nay, not so much as to hang the felon King's head at thy saddle-bow, lord."

By sunset they were out of the wood and on the side of a rough fell, so they went no further, but lighted fires at the edge of the thicket, and made merry round about them, singing their songs concerning the deeds of their folk, and jesting withal, but not foully; and they roasted venison of hart and hind at the fires, and they had with them wine, the more part whereof they had found in the slain King's carriages, and they made great feast to the wayfarers, and were exceeding fain of them; after their fashion, whereas if a man were their friend he could scarce be enough their friend, and if he were their foe, they could never be fierce enough with him.

CHAPTER 11

They Come Through the Mountains Into the Plain

On the morrow early they all fared on together, and thereafter they went for two days more till they came into a valley amidst of the mountains which was fair and lovely, and therein was the dwelling or town of this Folk of the

Fells. It was indeed no stronghold, save that it was not easy to find, and that the way thither was well defensible were foemen to try it. The houses thereof were artless, the chiefest of them like to the great barn of an abbey in our land, the others low and small; but the people, both men and women, haunted mostly the big house. As for the folk, they were for the more part like those whom they had met afore: strong men, but not high of stature, black-haired, with blue or grey eyes, cheerful of countenance, and of many words. Their women were mostly somewhat more than comely, smiling, kind of speech, but not suffering the caresses of aliens. They saw no thralls amongst them; and when Ralph asked hereof, how that might be, since they were men-catchers, they told him that when they took men and women, as oft they did, they always sold them for what they would bring to the plain-dwellers; or else slew them, or held them to ransom, but never brought them home to their stead. Howbeit, when they took children, as whiles befell, they sometimes brought them home, and made them very children of their Folk with many uncouth prayers and worship of their Gods, who were indeed, as they deemed, but forefathers of the Folk.

Now Ralph, he and his, being known for friends, these wild men could not make enough of them, and as it were, compelled them to abide there three days, feasting them, and making them all the cheer they might. And they showed the wayfarers their manner of hunting, both of the hart and the boar, and of wild bulls also. At first Ralph somewhat loathed all this (though he kept a pleasant countenance toward his host), for sorely he desired the fields of Upmeads and his father's house. But at last when the hunt was up in the mountains, and especially of the wild bulls, the heart and the might in him so arose that he enforced himself to do well, and the wild men wondered at his prowess, whereas he was untried in this manner of sports, and they deemed him one of the Gods, and said that their kinsman had done well to get him so good a friend. Both Ursula and the Sage withheld them from this hunting, and Ursula abode with the women, who told her much of their ways of life, and stories of old time; frank and free they were, and loved her much, and she

was fain of such manly-minded women after the sleight and lies of the poor thralls of Utterbol.

On the fourth day the wayfarers made them ready and departed; and the chief of the Folk went with them with a chosen band of weaponed men, partly for the love of his guests, and partly that he might see the Goldburg men-at-arms safe back to the road unto the plain and the Midhouse of the Mountains, for they went now by other ways, which missed the said House. On this journey naught befell to tell of, and they all came down safe into the plain.

There the Goldburg men took their wage, and bidding farewell, turned back with the wild men, praising Ralph much for his frankness and open hand. As for the wild men, they exceeded in their sorrow for the parting, and many of them wept and howled as though they had seen him die before their faces. But all that came to an end, and presently their cheer was amended, and their merry speech and laughter came down from the pass unto the wayfarers' ears as each band rode its way.

CHAPTER 12
The Roads Sunder Again

Ralph and Ursula, with the Sage and Michael-a-dale went their ways, and all was smooth with them, and they saw but few folk, and those mild and lowly. At last, of an afternoon, they saw before then afar off the towers and pinnacles of Whitwall, and Ralph's heart rose within him, so that he scarce knew how to contain himself; but Ursula was shy and silent, and her colour came and went, as though some fear had hold of her. Now they two were riding on somewhat ahead of the others, so Ralph turned to Ursula, and asked what ailed her. She smiled on him and said: "A simple

sickness. I am drawing nigh to thy home, and I am ashamed. Beyond the mountains, who knew what and whence I was? I was fair, and for a woman not unvaliant, and that was enough. But now when I am coming amongst the baronages and the lineages, what shall I do to hold up my head before the fools and the dastards of these high kindreds? And that all the more, my knight, because thou art changed since yester-year, and since we met on the want-way of the Wood Perilous, when I bade thee remember that thou wert a King's son and I a yeoman's daughter; for then thou wert but a lad, high-born and beautiful, but simple maybe, and untried; whereas now thou art meet to sit in the Kaiser's throne and rule the world from the Holy City."

He laughed gaily and said: "What! is it all so soon forgotten, our deeds beyond the Mountains? Belike because we had no minstrel to rhyme it for us. Or is it all but a dream? and has the last pass of the mountains changed all that for us? What then! hast thou never become my beloved, nor lain in one bed with me? Thou whom I looked to deliver from the shame and the torment of Utterbol, never didst thou free thyself without my helping, and meet me in the dark wood, and lead me to the Sage who rideth yonder behind us! No, nor didst thou ride fearless with me, leaving the world behind; nor didst thou comfort me when my heart went nigh to breaking in the wilderness! Nor thee did I deliver as I saw thee running naked from the jaws of death. Nor were we wedded in the wilderness far from our own folk. Nor didst thou deliver me from the venom of the Dry Tree. Yea verily, nor did we drink together of the Water of the Well! It is all but tales of Swevenham, a blue vapour hanging on the mountains yonder! So be it then! And here we ride together, deedless, a man and a maid of whom no tale may be told. What next then, and who shall sunder us?"

Therewith he drew his sword from the sheath, and tossed it into the air, and caught it by the hilts as it came down, and he cried out: "Hearken, Ursula! By my sword I swear it, that when I come home to the little land, if my father and my mother and all my kindred fall not down before thee and worship thee, then will I be a man without kindred, and I

will turn my back on the land I love, and the House wherein I was born, and will win for thee and me a new kindred that all the world shall tell of. So help me Saint Nicholas, and all Hallows, and the Mother of God!"

She looked on him with exceeding love, and said: "Ah, beloved, how fair thou art! Is it not as I said, yea, and more, that now lieth the world at thy feet, if thou wilt stoop to pick it up? Believe me, sweet, all folk shall see this as I see it, and shall judge betwixt thee and me, and deem me naught."

"Beloved," he said, "thou dost not wholly know thyself; and I deem that the mirrors of steel serve thee but ill; and now must thou have somewhat else for a mirror, to wit, the uprising and increase of trouble concerning thee and thy fairness, and the strife of them that love thee overmuch, who shall strive to take thee from me; and then the blade that hath seen the Well at the World's End shall come out of his sheath and take me and thee from the hubbub, and into the quiet fields of my father's home, and then shalt thou be learned of thyself, when thou seest that thou art the desire of all hearts."

"Ah, the wisdom of thee," she said, "and thy valiancy, and I am become feeble and foolish before thee! What shall I do then?"

He said: "Many a time shall it be shown what thou shalt do; but here and now is the highway dry and long, and the plain meads and acres on either hand, and a glimmer of Whitwall afar off, and the little cloud of dust about us two in the late spring weather; and the Sage and Michael riding behind us, and smiting dust from the hard road. And now if this also be a dream, let is speedily begone, and let us wake up in the ancient House at Upmeads, which thou hast never seen—and thou and I in each other's arms."

CHAPTER 13

They Come to Whitwall Again

Herewith they were come to a little thorp where the way sundered, for the highway went on to Whitwall, and a byway turned off to Swevenham. Thereby was a poor hostel, where they stayed and rested for the night, because evening was at hand. So when those four had eaten and drunk there together, Ralph spoke and said: "Michael-a-dale, thou art for Swevenham to-morrow?" "Yea, lord," said Michael, "belike I shall yet find kindred there; and I call to thy mind that I craved of thee to lead me to Swevenham as payment for all, if I had done aught for thy service."

"Sooth is that," said Ralph, "thou shalt go with my goodwill; and, as I deem, thou shalt not lack company betwixt here and Swevenham, whereas our dear friend here, the friend of thy father's father, is going the same road."

Then the Sage of Swevenham leaned across the board, and said: "What word hath come out of thy mouth, my son?" Said Ralph, smiling on him: "It is the last word which we have heard from thee of this matter, though verily it was spoken a while ago. What wilt thou add to it as now?" "This," quoth the Sage, "that I will leave thee no more till thou biddest me go from thee. Was this word needful?"

Ralph reached his hand to him and said: "It is well and more; but the road hence to Upmeads may yet be a rough one." "Yea," said the Sage, "yet shall we come thither all living, unless my sight now faileth."

Then Ursula rose up and came to the old man, and cast her arms about him and said: "Yea, father, come with us, and let thy wisdom bless our roof-tree. Wilt thou not teach

our children wisdom; yea, maybe our children's children, since thou art a friend of the Well?"

"I know not of the teaching of wisdom," said the Sage; "but as to my going with thee, it shall be as I said e'en-now; and forsooth I looked for this bidding of thee to make naught of the word which I spoke ere yet I had learned wisdom of thee."

Therewith were they merry, and fain of each other, and the evening wore amidst great content.

But when morning was come they gat to horse, and Ralph spake to Michael and said: "Well, friend, now must thou ride alone to thy kindred, and may fair days befall thee in Swevenham. But if thou deem at any time that matters go not so well with thee as thou wouldst, then turn thine head to Upmeads, and try it there, and we shall further thee all we may."

Then came the Sage to Michael as he sat upon his horse, a stalwarth man of some forty winters, and said: "Michael-a-dale, reach me thine hand." So did he, and the Sage looked into the palm thereof, and said: "This man shall make old bones, and it is more like than not, King's son, that he shall seek to thee at Upmeads ere he die." Said Ralph: "His coming shall be a joy to us, how pleasant soever our life may be otherwise. Farewell, Michael! all good go with thee for thine wholesome redes."

So then Michael gave them farewell, and rode his ways to Swevenham, going hastily, as one who should hurry away from a grief.

But the three held on their way to Whitwall, and it was barely noon when they came to the gate thereof on a Saturday of latter May. It was a market-day, and the streets were thronged, and they looked on the folk and were fain of them, since they seemed to them to be something more than aliens. The folk also looked on them curiously, and deemed them goodly, both the old man and the two knights, for they thought no otherwise of Ursula than that she was a carle.

But now as they rode, slowly because of the crowd, up Petergate, they heard a cry of one beside them, as of a man astonished but joyful; so Ralph drew rein, and turned thither

whence the cry came, and Ursula saw a man wide-shouldered, grey-haired, blue-eyed, and ruddy of countenance—a man warrior-like to look on, and girt with a long sword. Ralph lighted down from his horse, and met the man, who was coming toward him, cast his arms about his neck, and kissed him, and lo, it was Richard the Red. The people round about, when they saw it, clapped their hands, and crowded about the two crying out: "Hail to the friends long parted, and now united!" But Richard, whom most knew, cried out: "Make way, my masters! will ye sunder us again?" Then he said to Ralph: "Get into thy saddle, lad; for surely thou hast a tale to tell overlong for the open street."

Ralph did as he was bidden, and without more ado they went on all toward that hostelry where Ralph had erst borne the burden of grief. Richard walked by Ralph's side, and as he went he said: "Moreover, lad, I can see that thy tale is no ill one; therefore my heart is not wrung for thee or me, though I wait for it a while." Then again he said: "Thou doest well to hide her loveliness in war-weed even in this town of peace."

Ursula reddened, and Richard laughed and said: "Well, it is a fair rose which thou hast brought from east-away. There will be never another couple in these parts like you. Now I see the words on thy lips; so I tell thee that Blaise thy brother is alive and well and happy; which last word means that his coffer is both deep and full. Forsooth, he would make a poor bargain in buying any kingship that I wot of, so rich he is, yea, and mighty withal."

Said Ralph: "And how went the war with Walter the Black?"

Even as he spake his face changed, for he bethought him over closely of the past days, and his dream of the Lady of Abundance and of Dorothea, who rode by him now as Ursula. But Richard spake: "Short is the tale to tell. I slew him in shock of battle, and his men craved peace of the good town. Many were glad of his death, and few sorrowed for it; for, fair as his young body was, he was a cruel tyrant."

Therewith were they come to the hostel of the Lamb, which was the very same house wherein Ralph had abided

aforetime; and as he entered it, it is not to be said but that inwardly his heart bled for the old sorrow. Ursula looked on him lovingly and blithely; and when they were within doors Richard turned to the Sage and said: "Hail to thee, reverend man! wert thou forty years older to behold, outworn and forgotten of death, I should have said that thou wert like to the Sage that dwelt alone amidst the mountains nigh to Swevenham when I was a little lad, and fearsome was the sight of thee unto me."

The Sage laughed and said: "Yea, somewhat like am I yet to myself of forty years ago. Good is thy memory, greybeard."

Then Richard shook his head, and spake under his breath: "Yea, then it was no dream or coloured cloud, and he hath drank of the waters, and so then hath my dear lord." Then he looked up bright-faced, and called on the serving-men, and bade one lead them into a fair chamber, and another go forth and provide a banquet to be brought in thither. So they went up into a goodly chamber high aloft; and Ursula went forth from it awhile, and came back presently clad in very fair woman's raiment, which Ralph had bought for her at Goldburg. Richard looked on her and nothing else for a while; then he walked about the chamber uneasily, now speaking with the Sage, now with Ursula, but never with Ralph. At last he spake to Ursula, and said: "Grant me a grace, lady, and be not wroth if I take thy man into the window yonder that I may talk with him privily while ye hold converse together, thou and the Sage of Swevenham."

She laughed merrily and said: "Sir nurse, take thy bantling and cosset him in whatso corner thou wilt, and I will turn away mine eyes from thy caresses."

So Richard took Ralph into a window, and sat down beside him and said: "Mayhappen I shall sadden thee by my question, but I mind me what out last talking together was about, and therefore I must needs ask thee this, was that other one fairer than this one is?"

Ralph knit his brows: "I wot not," quoth he, "since she is gone, that other one."

"Yea," said Richard, "but this I say, that she is without a blemish. Did ye drink of the Well together?"

"Yea, surely," said Ralph. Said Richard: "And is this woman of a good heart? Is she valiant?" "Yea, yea," said Ralph, flushing red.

"As valiant as was that other?" said Richard. Said Ralph: "How may I tell, unless they were tried in one way?" Yet Richard spake: "Are ye wedded?" "Even so," said Ralph.

"Dost thou deem her true?" said Richard. "Truer than myself," said Ralph, in a voice which was somewhat angry.

Quoth Richard: "Then is it better than well, and better than well; for now hast thou wedded into the World of living men, and not to a dream of the Land of Fairy."

Ralph sat silent a little, and as if he were swallowing somewhat; at last he said: "Old friend, I were well content if thou wert to speak such words no more; for it irks me, and woundeth my heart."

Said Richard: "Well, I will say no more thereof; be content therefore, for now I have said it, and thou needest not fear me, what I have to say thereon any more; and thou mayst well wot that I must needs have said somewhat of this."

Ralph nodded to him friendly, and even therewith came in the banquet, which was richly served, as for a King's son, and wine was poured forth of the best, and they feasted and were merry. And then Ralph told all the tale of his wanderings how it had betid, bringing in all that Ursula had told him of Utterbol; while as for her she put in no word of it. So that at last Ralph, being wishful to hear her tell somewhat, made more of some things than was really in them, so that she might set him right; but no word more she said for all that, but only smiled on him now and again, and sat blushing like a rose over her golden-flowered gown, while Richard looked on her and praised her in his heart exceedingly.

But when Ralph had done the story (which was long, so that by then it was over it had been dark night some while), Richard said: "Well, fosterling, thou hast seen much, and done much, and many would say that thou art a lucky man,

and that more and much more lieth ready to thine hand. Whither now wilt thou wend, or what wilt thou do?"

Ralph's face reddened, as its wont had been when it was two years younger, at contention drawing nigh, and he answered: "Where then should I go save to the House of my Fathers, and the fields that fed them? What should I do but live amongst my people, warding them from evil, and loving them and giving them good counsel? For wherefore should I love them less than heretofore? Have they become dastards, and the fools of mankind?"

Quoth Richard: "They are no more fools than they were belike, nor less valiant. But thou art grown wiser and mightier by far; so that thou art another manner man than thou wert, and the Master of Masters maybe. To Upmeads wilt thou go; but wilt thou abide there? Upmeads is a fair land, but a narrow; one day is like another there, save when sorrow and harm is blent with it. The world is wide, and now I deem that thou holdest the glory thereof in the hollow of thine hand."

Then spake the Sage, and said: "Yea, Richard of Swevenham, and how knowest thou but that this sorrow and trouble have not now fallen upon Upmeads? And if that be so, upon whom should they call to their helping rather than him who can help them most, and is their very lord?" Said Richard: "It may be so, wise man, though as yet we have heard no tidings thereof. But if my lord goeth to their help, yet, when the trouble shall be over, will he not betake him thither where fresh deeds await him?"

"Nay, Richard," said the Sage, "art thou so little a friend of thy fosterling as not to know that when he hath brought back peace to the land, it will be so that both he shall need the people, and they him, so that if he go away for awhile, yet shall he soon come back? Yea, and so shall the little land, it may be, grow great."

Now had Ralph sat quiet while this talk was going on, and as if he heeded not, and his eyes were set as if he were beholding something far away. Then Richard spoke again after there had been silence awhile: "Wise man, thou sayest sooth; yea, and so it is, that though we here have heard no

tale concerning war in Upmeads, yet, as it were, we have been feeling some stirring of the air about us; even as though matters were changing, great might undone, and weakness grown to strength. Who can say but our lord may find deeds to hand or ever he come to Upmeads?"

Ralph turned his head as one awaking from a dream, and he said: "When shall to-morrow be, that we may get us gone from Whitwall, we three, and turn our faces toward Upmeads?"

Said Richard: "Wilt thou not tarry a day or two, and talk with thine own mother's son and tell him of thine haps?" "Yea," said Ralph, "and so would I, were it not that my father's trouble and my mother's grief draw me away."

"O tarry not," said Ursula; "nay, not for the passing of the night; but make this hour the sunrise, and begone by the clear of the moon. For lo! how he shineth through the window!"

Then she turned to Richard, and said: "O fosterer of my love, knowest thou not that as now he speaketh as a Friend of the Well, and wotteth more of far-off tidings than even this wise man of many years?"

Said Ralph: "She sayeth sooth, O Richard. Or how were it if the torch were even now drawing nigh to the High House of Upmeads: yea, or if the very House were shining as a dreary candle of the meadows, and reddening the waters of the ford! What do we here?"

Therewith he thrust the board from him, and arose and went to his harness, and fell to arming him, and he spake to Richard: "Now shall thine authority open to us the gates of the good town, though the night be growing old; we shall go our ways, dear friend, and mayhappen we shall meet again, and mayhappen not: and thou shalt tell my brother Blaise, who wotteth not of my coming hither, how things have gone with me, and how need hath drawn me hence. And bid him come see me at Upmeads, and to ride with a good band of proper men, for eschewing the dangers of the road."

Then spake Richard: "I shall tell Lord Blaise neither more nor less than thou mayst tell him thyself: for think it not that thou shalt go without me. As for Blaise, he may well spare

me; for he is become a chief and Lord of the Porte; and the Porte hath now right good men-at-arms, and captains withal younger and defter than I be. But now suffer me to send a swain for my horse and arms, and another to the captain of the watch at West-gate Bar that he be ready to open to me and three of my friends, and to send me a let-pass for the occasion. So shall we go forth ere it be known that the brother of the Lord of the Porte is abiding at the Lamb. For verily I see that the Lady hath spoken truth; and it is like that she is forseeing, even as thou hast grown to be. And now I bethink me I might lightly get me a score of men to ride with us, whereas we may meet men worse than ourselves on the way."

Said Ralph: "All good go with thy words, Richard; yet gather not force: there may stout men be culled on the road; and if thou runnest or ridest about the town, we may yet be stayed by Blaise and his men. Wherefore now send for thine horse and arms, and bid the host here open his gates with little noise when we be ready; and we will presently ride out by the clear of the moon. But thou, beloved, shalt don thine armour no more, but shalt ride henceforth in thy woman's raiment, for the wild and the waste is well nigh over, and the way is but short after all these months of wandering; and I say that now shall all friends drift toward us, and they that shall rejoice to strike a stroke for my father's son, and the peaceful years of the Friend of the Well."

To those others, and chiefly to Ursula, it seemed that now he spoke strongly and joyously, like to a king and a captain of men. Richard did his bidding, and was swift in dealing with the messengers. But the Sage said: "Ralph, my son, since ye have lost one man-at-arms, and have gotten but this golden angel in his stead, I may better that. I prithee bid thy man Richard find me armour and weapons that I may amend the shard in thy company. Thou shalt find me no feeble man when we come to push of staves."

Ralph laughed, and bade Richard see to it; so he dealt with the host, and bought good war-gear of him, and a trenchant sword, and an axe withal; and when the Sage was armed he

looked as doughty a warrior as need be. By this time was Richard's horse and war-gear come, and he armed him speedily and gave money to the host, and they rode therewith all four out of the hostel, and found the street empty and still, for the night was wearing. So rode they without tarrying into Westgate and came to the Bar, and speedily was the gate opened to them; and anon were they on the moonlit road outside of Whitwall.

CHAPTER 14

They Ride Away From Whitwall

But when they were well on the way, and riding a good pace by the clear of the moon, Richard spake to Ralph, and said: "Wither ride we now?" said Ralph: "Wither, save to Upmeads?" "Yea, yea," said Richard, "but by what road? shall we ride down to the ford of the Swelling Flood, and ride the beaten way, or take to the downland and the forest, and so again by the forest and downland and the forest once more, till we come to the Burg of the Four Friths?"

"Which way is the shorter?" said Ralph. "Forsooth," said Richard, "by the wildwood ye may ride shorter, if ye know it as I do." Quoth the Sage: "Yea, or as I do. Hear a wonder! that two men of Swevenham know the wilds more than twenty miles from their own thorp."

Said Ralph: "Well, wend we the shorter road; why make more words over it? Or what lion lieth on the path? Is it that we may find it hard to give the go-by to the Burg of the Four Friths?"

Said Richard: "Though the Burg be not very far from Whitwall, we hear but little tidings thence; our chapmen but seldom go there, and none cometh to us thence save such of our men as have strayed thither. Yet, as I said e'en now in

the hostel, there is an air of tidings abroad, and one rumour sayeth, and none denieth it, that the old fierceness and stout headstrong mood of the Burg is broken down, and that men dwell there in peace and quiet."

Said the Sage: "In any case we have amongst us lore enough to hoodwink them if they be foes; so that we shall pass easily. Naught of this need we fear."

But Richard put his mouth close to Ralph's ear, and spake to him softly: "Shall we indeed go by that shorter road, whatever in days gone by may have befallen in places thereon, to which we must go a-nigh tomorrow?" Ralph answered softly in turn: "Yea, forsooth: for I were fain to try my heart, how strong it may be."

So they rode on, and turned off from the road that led down to the ford of the Swelling Flood, anigh which Ralph had fallen in with Blaise and Richard on the day after the woeful slaying, which had made an end of his joy for that time. But when they were amidst of the bushes and riding a deep ghyll of the waste, Richard said: "It is well that we are here: for now if Blaise send riders to bring us back courteously, they shall not follow us at once, but shall ride straight down to the ford, and even cross it in search of us." "Yea," said Ralph, "it is well in all wise."

So then they rode thence awhile till the moon grew low, and great, and red, and sank down away from them; and by then were they come to a shepherd's cot, empty of men, with naught therein save an old dog, and some victual, as bread and white cheese, and a well for drinking. So there they abode and rested that night.

CHAPTER 15

A Strange Meeting in the Wilderness

On the morrow betimes they got to the road again; the country at first, though it was scanty of tillage, was not unfurnished of sheep, being for the most part of swelling hills and downs well grassed, with here and there a deep cleft in them. They saw but few houses, and those small and poor. A few shepherds they fell in with, who were short of speech, after the manner of such men, but deemed a greeting not wholly thrown away on such goodly folk as those wayfarers.

So they rode till it was noon, and Richard talked more than his wont was, though his daily use it was to be of many words: nor did the Sage spare speech; but Ursula spoke little, nor heeded much what the others said, and Ralph deemed that she was paler than of wont, and her brows were knitted as if she were somewhat anxious. As for him, he was grave and calm, but of few words; and whiles when Richard was wordiest he looked on him steadily for a moment, whereat Richard changed countenance, and for a while stinted his speech, but not for long; while Ralph looked about him, inwardly striving to gather together the ends of unhappy thoughts that floated about him, and to note the land he was passing through, if indeed he had verily seen it aforetime, elsewhere than in some evil dream.

At last when they stopped to bait by some scrubby bushes at the foot of a wide hill-side, he took Richard apart, and said to him: "Old friend, and whither go we?" Said Richard: "As thou wottest, to the Burg of the Four Friths." "Yea," said Ralph, "but by what road?" Said Richard: "Youngling, is not thine heart, then, as strong as thou deemedst last night?" Ralph was silent a while, and then he said: "I know

what thou wouldst say; we are going by the shortest road to the Castle of Abundance."

He spake this out loud, but Richard nodded his head to him, as if he would say: "Yea, so it is; but hold thy peace." But Ralph knew that Ursula had come up behind him, and, still looking at Richard, he put his open hand aback toward her, and her hand fell into it. Then he turned about to her, and saw that her face was verily pale; so he put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her kindly; and she let her head fall on to his bosom and fell a-weeping, and the two elders turned away to the horses, and feigned to be busy with them.

Thus then they bided some minutes of time, and then all gat to horse again, and Ursula's face was cleared of the grief of fear, and the colour had come back to her cheeks and lips. But Ralph's face was stern and sorrowful to behold; howbeit, as they rode away he spake in a loud and seeming cheerful voice: "Still ever shorteneth more and more the way unto my Fathers' House: and withal I am wishful to see if it be indeed true that the men of the Burg have become mild and peaceful; and to know what hath befallen those doughty champions of the Dry Tree; and if perchance they have any will to hold us a tilting in courteous fashion."

Richard smiled on him, and said: "Thou holdest more then by the Dry Tree than by the Burg; though while agone we deemed the Champions worse men to meet in the wood than the Burgers."

"So it is," said Ralph; "but men are oft mis-said by them that know them not thoroughly: and now, if it were a good wish, O Sage of Swevenham, I were fain to fall in with the best of all those champions, a tall man and a proper, who, meseems, had good-will toward me, I know not why."

Quoth the Sage: "If thou canst not see the end of this wish fulfilled, no more can I. And yet, meseems something may follow it which is akin to grief: be content with things so done, my son."

Now Ralph holds his peace, and they speed on their way, Ursula riding close by Ralph's side, and caressing him with looks, and by touch also when she might; and after a while he fell to talking again, and ever in the same loud, cheerful

voice. Till at last, in about another hour, they came in sight of the stream which ran down toward the Swelling Flood from that pool wherein erst the Lady of Abundance had bathed her before the murder. Hard looked Ralph on the stream, but howsoever his heart might ache with the memory of that passed grief, like as the body aches with the bruise of yesterday's blow, yet he changed countenance but little, and in his voice was the same cheery sound. But Ursula noted him, and how his eyes wandered, and how little he heeded the words of the others, and she knew what ailed him, for long ago he had told her all that tale, and so now her heart was troubled, and she looked on him and was silent.

Thus, then, a little before sunset, they came on that steep cliff with the cave therein, and the little green plain thereunder, and the rocky bank going down sheer into the water of the stream. Forsooth they came on it somewhat suddenly from out of the bushes of the valley; and there indeed not only the Sage and Richard, but Ursula also, were stayed by the sight as folk compelled; for all three knew what had befallen there. But Ralph, though he looked over his shoulder at it all, yet rode on steadily, and when he saw that the others lingered, he waved his hand and cried out as he rode: "On, friends, on! for the road shortens towards my Fathers' House." Then were they ashamed, and shook their reins to hasten after him.

But in that very nick of time there came forth one from amidst the bushes that edged the pool of the stream and strode dripping on to the shallow; a man brown and hairy, and naked, save for a green wreath about his middle. Tall he was above the stature of most men; awful of aspect, and his eyes glittered from his dark brown face amidst of his shock-head of the colour of rain-spoilt hay. He stood and looked while one might count five, and then without a word or cry rushed up from the water, straight on Ursula, who was riding first of the three lingerers, and in the twinkling of an eye tore her from off her horse; and she was in his grasp as the cushat in the claws of the kite. Then he cast her to earth, and stood over her, shaking a great club, but or ever he brought it down he turned his head over his shoulder toward the cliff

and the cave therein, and in that same moment first one blade and then another flashed about him, and he fell crashing down upon his back, smitten in the breast and the side by Richard and Ralph; and the wounds were deep and deadly.

Ralph heeded him no more, but drew Ursula away from him, and raised her up and laid her head upon his knee; and she had not quite swooned away, and forsooth had taken but little hurt; only she was dizzy with terror and the heaving up and casting down.

She looked up into Ralph's face, and smiled on him and said: "What hath been done to me, and why did he do it?"

His eyes were still wild with fear and wrath, as he answered: "O Beloved, Death and the foeman of old came forth from the cavern of the cliff. What did they there, Lord God? and he caught thee to slay thee; but him have I slain. Nevertheless, it is a terrible and evil place: let us go hence."

"Yea," she said, "let us go speedily!" Then she stood up, weak and tottering still, and Ralph arose and put his left arm about her to stay her; and lo, there before them was Richard kneeling over the wild-man, and the Sage was coming back from the river with his headpiece full of water; so Ralph cried out: "To horse, Richard, to horse! Hast thou not done slaying the woodman?"

But therewith came a weak and hoarse voice from the earth, and the wild-man spake. "Child of Upmeads, drive not on so hard: it will not be long. For thou and Richard the Red are naught lighthanded."

Ralph marvelled that the wild-man knew him and Richard, but the wild-man spake again: "Hearken, thou lover, thou young man!"

But therewith was the Sage come to him and kneeling beside him with the water, and he drank thereof, while Ralph said to him: "What is this woodman? and canst thou speak my Latin? What art thou?"

Then the wild-man when he had drunk raised him up a little, and said: "Young man, thou and Richard are deft leeches; ye have let me blood to a purpose, and have brought back to me my wits, which were wandering wide. Yet am I indeed where my fool's brains told me I was."

Then he lay back again, and turned his head as well as he could toward the cavern in the cliff. But Ralph deemed he had heard his voice before, and his heart was softened toward him, he knew not why; but he said: "Yea, but wherefore didst thou fall upon the Lady?" The wild-man strove with his weakness, and said angrily: "What did another woman there?" Then he said in a calmer but weaker voice: "Nay, my wits shall wander no more from me; we will make the journey together, I and my wits. But O, young man, this I will say if I can. Thou fleddest from her and forgattest her. I came to her and forgat all but her; yea, my very life I forgat."

Again he spoke, and his voice was weaker yet: "Kneel down by me, or I may not tell thee what I would; my voice dieth before me."

Then Ralph knelt down by him, for he began to have a deeming of what he was, and he put his face close to the dying man's, and said to him; "I am here, what wouldst thou?"

Said the wild-man very feebly: "I did not much for thee, time was; how might I, when I loved her so sorely? But I did a little. Believe it, and do so much for me that I may lie by her side when I am dead, who never lay by her living. For into the cave I durst go never."

Then Ralph knew him, that he was the tall champion whom he had met first at the churchyard gate of Netherton; so he said: "I know thee now, and I will promise to do thy will herein. I am sorry that I have slain thee; forgive it me."

A mocking smile came into the dying man's eyes, and he spake whispering: "Richard it was; not thou."

The smile spread over his face, he strove to turn more toward Ralph, and said in a very faint whisper: "The last time!"

No more he said, but gave up the ghost presently. The Sage rose up from his side and said: "Ye may now bury this man as he craved of thee, for he is dead. Thus hath thy wish been accomplished; for this was the great champion and duke of the men of the Dry Tree. Indeed it is a pity of him that he

is dead, for as terrible as he was to his foes, he was no ill man."

Spake Richard: "Now is the riddle areded of the wild-man and the mighty giant that haunted these passes. We have played together or now, in days long past, he and I; and ever he came to his above. He was a wise man and a prudent that he should have become a wild-man. It is great pity of him."

But Ralph took his knight's cloak of red scarlet, and they lapped the wild-man therein, who had once been a champion beworshipped. But first Ursula sheared his hair and his beard, till the face of him came back again, grave, and somewhat mocking, as Ralph remembered it, time was. Then they bore him in the four corners across the stream, and up on to the lawn before the cliff; and Richard and the Sage bore him into the cave, and laid him down there beside the howe which Ralph had erewhile heaped over the Lady; and now over him also they heaped stones.

Meanwhile Ursula knelt at the mouth of the cave and wept; but Ralph turned him about and stood on the edge of the bank, and looked over the ripple of the stream on to the valley, where the moon was now beginning to cast shadows, till those two came out of the cave for the last time. Then Ralph turned to Ursula and raised her up and kissed her, and they went down all of them from that place of death and ill-hap, and gat to horse on the other side of the stream, and rode three miles further on by the glimmer of the moon, and lay down to rest amongst the bushes of the waste, with few words spoken between them.

CHAPTER 16

They Come to the Castle of Abundance Once More

When they rode on next morning Ralph was few-spoken, and seemed to heed little so long as they made good speed on the way: most of the talk was betwixt Richard and the Sage, Ralph but putting in a word when it would have seemed churlish to forbear.

So they went their ways through the wood till by then the sun was well westering they came out at the Water of the Oak, and Richard drew rein there, and spake: "Here is a fair place for a summer night's lodging, and I would warrant both good knight and fair lady have lain here aforetime, and wished the dark longer: shall we not rest here?"

Ralph stared at him astonished, and then anger grew in his face for a little, because, forsooth, as Richard and the Sage both wotted of the place of the slaying of the Lady, and he himself had every yard of the way in his mind as they went, it seemed but due that they should have known of this place also, what betid there: but it was not so, and the place was to Richard like any other lawn of the woodland.

But thought came back to Ralph in a moment, and he smiled at his own folly, howbeit he could not do to lie another night on that lawn with other folk than erst. So he said quietly: "Nay, friend, were we not better to make the most of this daylight? Seest thou it wants yet an hour of sunset?"

Richard nodded a yeasay, and the Sage said no word more; but Ursula cast her anxious look on Ralph as though she understood what was moving in him; and therewith those others rode away lightly, but Ralph turned slowly from the oak-tree, and might not forbear looking on to the short

sward round about, as if he hoped to see some token left behind. Then he lifted up his face as one awaking, shook his rein, and rode after the others down the long water.

So they turned from the water anon, and rode the woodland ways, and lay that night by a stream that ran west.

They arose betimes on the morrow, and whereas the Sage knew the woodland ways well, they made but a short journey of it to the Castle of Abundance, and came into the little plain but two hours after noon, where saving that the scythe had not yet wended the tall mowing grass in the crofts which the beasts and sheep were not pasturing, all was as on that other tide. The folk were at work in their gardens, or herding their cattle in the meads, and as aforetime they were merry of countenance and well-clad, fair and gentle to look on.

There were their pleasant cots, and the little white church, and the fair walls of the castle on its low mound, and the day bright and sunny, all as aforetime, and Ralph looked on it all, and made no countenance of being moved beyond his wont.

So they came out of the wood, and rode to the ford of the river, and the carles and queans came streaming from their garths and meads to meet them, and stood round wondering at them; but an old carle came from out the throng and went up to Ralph, and hailed him, and said: "Oh, Knight! and hast thou come back to us? and has thou brought us tidings of our Lady? Who is this fair woman that rideth with thee? Is it she?"

Spake Ralph: "Nay; go look on her closely, and tell me thy deeming of her."

So the carle went up to Ursula, and peered closely into her face, and took her hand and looked on it, and knelt down and took her foot out of the stirrup, and kissed it, and then came back to Ralph, and said: "Fair Sir, I wot not but it may be her sister; for yonder old wise man I have seen here erst with our heavenly Lady. But though this fair woman may be her sister, it is not she. So tell me what is become of her, for it is long since we have seen her; and what thou tellest us, that same shall we trow, even as if thou wert her angel. For I spake with thee, it is nigh two years agone, when

thou wert abiding the coming of our Lady in the castle yonder. But now I see of thee that thou art brighter-faced, and mightier of aspect than aforetime, and it is in my mind that the Lady of Abundance must have loved thee and holpen thee, and blessed thee with some great blessing."

Said Ralph: "Old man, canst thou feel sorrow, and canst thou bear it?" The carle shook his head. "I wot not," said he, "I fear thy words." Said Ralph: "It were naught to say less than the truth; and this is the very truth, that thou shalt never see thy Lady any more. I was the last living man that ever saw her alive."

Then he spake in a loud voice and said: "Lament, ye people! for the Lady of Abundance is dead; yet sure I am that she sendeth this message to you, Live in peace, and love ye the works of the earth."

But when they heard him, the old man covered up his face with the folds of his gown, and all that folk brake forth into weeping, and crying out: "Woe for us! the Lady of Abundance is dead!" and some of the younger men cast themselves down on to the earth, and wallowed, weeping and wailing: and there was no man there that seemed as if he knew which way to turn, or what to do; and their faces were foolish with sorrow. Yet forsooth it was rather the carles than the queans who made all this lamentation.

At last the old man spake: "Fair sir, ye have brought us heavy tidings, and we know not how to ask you to tell us more of the tale. Yet if thou might'st but tell us how the Lady died? Woe's me for the word!"

Said Ralph: "She was slain with the sword."

The old man drew himself up stiff and stark, the eyes of him glittered under his white hair, and wrath changed his face, and the other men-folk thronged them to hearken what more should be said.

But the elder spake again: "Tell me who it was that slew her, for surely shall I slay him, or die in the pain else."

Said Ralph: "Be content, thou mayst not slay him; he was a great and mighty man, a baron who bore a golden sun on a blue field. Thou mayst not slay him." "Yea," said the old man, "but I will, or he me."

"Live in peace," said Ralph, "for I slew him then and there."

The old man held his peace a while, and then he said: "I know the man, for he hath been here aforetime, and not so long ago. But if he be dead, he hath a brother yet, an exceeding mighty man: he will be coming here to vex us and minish us."

Said Ralph: "He will not stir from where he lies till Earth's bones be broken, for my sword lay in his body yesterday."

The old man stood silent again, and the other carles thronged him; but the woman stood aloof staring on Ralph. Then the elder came up to Ralph and knelt before him and kissed his feet; then he turned and called to him three of the others who were of the stoutest and most stalwarth, and he spake with them awhile, and then he came to Ralph again, and again knelt before him and said: "Lord, ye have come to us, and found us void of comfort, since we have lost our Lady. But we see in thee, that she hath loved thee and blessed thee, and thou hast slain her slayer and his kindred. And we see of thee also that thou art a good lord. O the comfort to us, therefore, if thou wouldest be our Lord! We will serve thee truly so far as we may: yea, even if thou be beset by foes, we will take bow and bill from the wall, and stand round about thee and fight for thee. Only thou must not ask us to go hence from this place: for we know naught but the Plain of Abundance, and the edges of the wood, and the Brethren of the House of the Thorn, who are not far hence. Now we pray thee by thy fathers not to naysay us, so sore as thou hast made our hearts. Also we see about thy neck the same-like pair of beads which our Lady was wont to bear, and we deem that ye were in one tale together."

Then was Ralph silent awhile, but the Sage spake to the elder: "Old man, how great is the loss of the Lady to you?" "Heavy loss, wise old man," said the carle, "as thou thyself mayst know, having known her."

"And what did she for you?" said the Sage. Said the elder: "We know that she was gracious to us; never did she lay tax or tale on us, and whiles she would give us of her store, and

that often, and abundantly. We deem also that every time when she came to us our increase became more plenteous, which is well seen by this, that since she hath ceased to come, the seasons have been niggard unto us."

The Sage smiled somewhat, and the old man went on: "But chiefly the blessing was to see her when she came to us: for verily it seemed that where she set her feet the grass grew greener, and that the flowers blossomed fairer where the shadow of her body fell." And therewith the old man fell a-weeping again.

The Sage held his peace, and Ralph still kept silence; and now of these men all the younger ones had their eyes upon Ursula.

After a while Ralph spake and said: "O elder, and ye folk of the People of Abundance, true it is that your Lady who is dead loved me, and it is through her that I am become a Friend of the Well. Now meseemeth though ye have lost your Lady, whom ye so loved and worshipped, God wot not without cause, yet I wot not why ye now cry out for a master, since ye dwell here in peace and quiet and all wealth, and the Fathers of the Thorn are here to do good to you. Yet, if ye will it in sooth, I will be called your Lord, in memory of your Lady whom ye shall not see again. And as time wears I will come and look on you and hearken to your needs: and if ye come to fear that any should fall upon you with the strong hand, then send ye a message to me, Ralph of Upmeads, down by the water, and I will come to you with such following as need be. And as for service, this only I lay upon you, that ye look to the Castle and keep it in good order, and ward it against thieves and runagates, and give guesting therein to any wandering knight or pilgrim, or honest goodman, who shall come to you. Now is all said, my masters, and I pray you let us depart in peace; for time presses."

Then all they (and this time women as well as men) cried out joyfully: "Hail to our lord! and long life to our helper." And the women withal drew nearer to him, and some came close up to him, as if they would touch him or kiss his hand,

but by seeming durst not, but stood blushing before him, and he looked on them, smiling kindly.

But the old man laid his hand on his knee and said: "Lord, wouldst thou not light down and enter thy Castle; for none hath more right there now than thou. The Prior of the Thorn hath told us that there is no lineage of the Lady left to claim it; and none other might ever have claimed it save the Baron of Sunway, whom thou hast slain. And else would we have slain him, since he slew our Lady."

Ralph shook his head and said: "Nay, old friend, and new vassal, this we may not do: we must on speedily, for belike there is work for us to do nearer home."

"Yea, Lord," said the carle, "but at least light down and sit for a while under this fair oak-tree in the heat of the day, and eat a morsel with us, and drink a cup, that thy luck may abide with us when thou art gone."

Ralph would not naysay him; so he and all of them got off their horses, and sat down on the green grass under the oak: and that people gathered about and sat down by them, save that a many of the women went to their houses to fetch out the victual. Meanwhile the carles fell to speech freely with the wayfarers, and told them much concerning their little land, were it hearsay, or stark sooth: such as tales of the wights that dwelt in the wood, wodehouses, and elf-women, and dwarfs, and such like, and how fearful it were to deal with such creatures. Amongst other matters they told how a hermit, a holy man, had come to dwell in the wood, in a clearing but a little way thence toward the north-west. But when Ralph asked it he dwelt on the way to the ford of the Swelling Flood, they knew not what he meant; for the wood was to them as a wall.

Hereon the Sage held one of the younger men in talk, and taught him what he might of the way to the Burg of the Four Friths, so that they might verily send a messenger to Upmeads if need were. But the country youth said there was no need to think thereof, as no man of theirs would dare the journey through the wood, and that if they had need of a messenger, one of the Fathers of the Thorn would do their

errand, whereas they were holy men, and knew the face of the world full well.

Now in this while the folk seemed to have gotten their courage again, and to be cheery, and to have lost their grief for the Lady: and of the maidens left about the oak were more than two or three very fair, who stood gazing at Ralph as if they were exceeding fain of him.

But amidst these things came back the women with the victual; to wit bread in baskets, and cheeses both fresh and old, and honey, and wood-strawberries, and eggs cooked diversely, and skewers of white wood with gobbets of roasted lamb's flesh, and salad good plenty. All these they bore first to Ralph and Ursula, and their two fellows, and then dealt them to their own folk: and they feasted and were merry in despite of that tale of evil tidings. They brought also bowls and pitchers of wine that was good and strong, and cider of their orchards, and called many a health to the new Lord and his kindred.

Thus then they abode a-feasting till the sun was westering and the shadows waxed about them, and then at last Ralph rose up and called to horse, and the other wayfarers arose also, and the horses were led up to them. Then the maidens, made bold by the joy of the feast, and being stirred to the heart by much beholding of this beloved Lord, cast off their shamefacedness and crowded about him, and kisssed his raiment and his hands: some even, though trembling, and more for love than fear, prayed him for kisses, and he, nothing loath, laughed merrily and laid his hands on their shoulders or took them by the chins, and set his lips to the sweetness of their cheeks and their lips, of those that asked and those that refrained; so that their hearts failed them for love of him, and when he was gone, they knew not how to go back to their houses, or the places that were familiar to them. Therewith he and his got into their saddles and rode away slowly, because of the thronging about them of that folk, who followed them to the edge of the wood, and even entered a little thereinto; and then stood gazing on Ralph and his fellows after they had spurred on and were riding down a glade of the woodland.

CHAPTER 17
They Fall in With That Hermit

So much had they tarried over this greeting and feasting, that though they had hoped to have come to the hermit's house that night, he of whom that folk had told them, it fell not so, whereas the day had aged so much ere they left the Plain of Abundance that it began to dusk before they had gone far, and they must needs stay and await the dawn there; so they dight their lodging as well as they might, and lay down and slept under the thick boughs.

Ralph woke about sunrise, and looking up saw a man standing over him, and deemed at first that it would be Richard or the Sage; but as his vision cleared, he saw that it was neither of them, but a new comer; a stout carle clad in russet, with a great staff in his hand and a short-sword girt to his side. Ralph sprang up, still not utterly awake, and cried out, "Who art thou, carle?" The man laughed, and said: "Yea, thou art still the same brisk lad, only filled out to something more warrior-like than of old. But it is unmeet to forget old friends. Why dost thou not hail me?"

"Because I know thee not, good fellow," said Ralph. But even as he spoke, he looked into the man's face again, and cried out: "By St. Nicholas! but it is Roger of the Ropewalk. But look you, fellow, if I have somewhat filled out, thou, who wast always black-muzzled, art now become as hairy as a wodehouse. What dost thou in the wilds?" Said Roger: "Did they not tell thee of a hermit new come to these shaws?" "Yea," said Ralph. "I am that holy man," quoth Roger, grinning; "not that I am so much of that, either. I have not come hither to pray or fast overmuch, but to rest my soul

and be out of the way of men. For all things have changed since my Lady passed away."

He looked about, and saw Ursula just rising up from the ground and the Sage stirring, while Richard yet hugged his bracken bed, snoring. So he said: "And who be these, and why hast thou taken to the wildwood? Yea lad, I see of thee, that thou hast gotten another Lady; and if mine eyes do not fail me she is fair enough. But there be others as fair; while the like to our Lady that was, there is none such."

He fell silent a while, and Ralph turned about to the others, for by this time Richard also was awake, and said: "This man is the hermit of whom we were told."

Roger said: "Yea, I am the hermit and the holy man; and withal I have a thing to hear and a thing to tell. Ye were best to come with me, all of you, to my house in the woods; a poor one, forsooth, but there is somewhat of victual here, and we can tell and hearken therein well sheltered and at peace. So to horse, fair folk."

They would not be bidden twice, but mounted and went along with him, who led them by a thicket path about a mile, till they came to a lawn where-through ran a stream; and there was a little house in it, simple enough, of one hall, built with rough tree-limbs and reed thatch. He brought them in, and bade them sit on such stools or bundles of stuff as were there. But withal he brought out victual nowise ill, though it were but simple also, of venison of the wildwood, with some little deal of cakes backed on the hearth, and he poured for them also both milk and wine.

They were well content with the banquet, and when they were full, Roger said: "Now, my Lord, like as oft befalleth minstrels, ye have had your wages before your work. Fall to, then, and pay me the scot by telling me all that hath befallen you since (woe worth the while!) my Lady died, —I must needs say, for thy sake."

"'All' is a big word," said Ralph, "but I will tell thee somewhat. Yet I bid thee take note that I and this ancient wise one, and my Lady withal, deem that I am drawn by my kindred to come to their help, and that time presses."

Roger scowled somewhat on Ursula; but he said: "Lord

and master, let not that fly trouble thy lip. For so I deem of it, that whatsoever time ye may lose by falling in with me, ye may gain twice as much again by hearkening my tale and the rede that shall go with it. And I do thee to wit that the telling of thy tale shall unfreeze mine; so tarry not, if ye be in haste to be gone, but let thy tongue wag."

Ralph smiled, and without more ado told him all that had befallen him; and of Swevenham and Utterbol, and of his captivity and flight; and of the meeting in the wood, and of the Sage (who there was), and of the journey to the Well, and what betid there and since, and of the death of the Champion of the Dry Tree.

But when he had made an end, Roger said: "There it is, then, as I said when she first spake to me of thee and bade me bring about that meeting with her, drawing thee first to the Burg and after to the Castle of Abundance, I have forgotten mostly by what lies; but I said to her that she had set her heart on a man over lucky, and that thou wouldst take her luck from her and make it thine. But now I will let all that pass, and will bid thee ask what thou wilt; and I promise thee that I will help thee to come thy ways to thy kindred, that thou mayst put forth thy luck in their behalf."

Said Ralph: "First of all, tell me what shall I do to pass unhindered through the Burg of the Four Friths?" Said Roger: "Thou shalt go in at one gate and out at the other, and none shall hinder thee."

Said Ralph: "And shall I have any hindrance from them of the Dry Tree?"

Roger made as if he were swallowing down something, and answered: "Nay, none."

"And the folk of Higham by the Way, and the Brethren and their Abbot?" said Ralph.

"I know but little of them," quoth Roger, "but I deem that they will make a push to have thee for captain; because they have had war on their hands of late. But this shall be at thine own will to say yea or nay to them. But for the rest on this side of the shepherds' country ye will pass by peaceful folk."

"Yea," said Ralph, "what then hath become of the pride

and cruelty of the Burg of the Four Friths, and the eagerness and fierceness of the Dry Tree?"

Quoth Roger: "This is the tale of it: After the champions of the Dry Tree had lost their queen and beloved, the Lady of Abundance, they were both restless and fierce, for the days of sorrow hung heavy on their hands. So on a time a great company of them had ado with the Burgers somewhat recklessly and came to the worse; wherefore some drew back into their fastness of the Scaur and the others still rode on, and further west than their wont had been; but warily when they had the Wood Perilous behind them, for they had learned wisdom again. Thus riding they had tidings of an host of the Burg of the Four Friths who were resting in a valley hard by with a great train of captives and beasts and other spoil: for they had been raising the fray against the Wheat-wearers, and had slain many carles there, and were bringing home to the Burg many young women and women-children, after their custom. So they of the Dry Tree advised them of these tidings, and deemed that it would ease the sorrow of their hearts for their Lady if they could deal with these sons of whores and make a mark upon the Burg: so they lay hid while the daylight lasted, and by night and cloud fell upon these fainéants of the Burg, and won them good cheap, as was like to be, though the Burg-dwellers were many the more. Whereof a many were slain, but many escaped and gat home to the Burg, even as will lightly happen even in the worst of overthrows, that not all, or even the more part be slain.

"Well, there were the champions and their prey, which was very great, and especially of women, of whom the more part were young and fair: for the women of the Wheat-wearers be goodly, and these had been picked out by the rutters of the Burg for their youth and strength and beauty. And whereas the men of the Dry Tree were scant of women at home, and sore-hearted because of our Lady, they forbore not these women, but fell to talking with them and loving them; howbeit in courteous and manly fashion, so that the women deemed themselves in heaven and were ready to do anything to please their lovers. So the end of it was that the

Champions sent messengers to Hampton and the Castle of the Scaur to tell what had betid, and they themselves took the road to the land of the Wheat-wearers, having those women with them not as captives but as free damsels.

"Now the road to the Wheat-wearing country was long, and on the way the damsels told their new men many things of their land and their unhappy wars with them of the Burg and the griefs and torments which they endured of them. And this amongst other things, that wherever they came, they slew all the males even to the sucking babe, but spared the women, even when they bore them not into captivity.

" 'Whereof,' said these poor damsels, 'it cometh that our land is ill-furnished of carles, so that we women, high and low, go afield and do many things, as crafts and the like, which in other lands are done by carles.' In sooth it seemed of them that they were both of stouter fashion, and defter than women are wont to be. So the champions, part in jest, part in earnest, bade them do on the armour of the slain Burgers, and take their weapons, and fell to teaching them how to handle staff and sword and bow; and the women took heart from the valiant countenance of their new lovers, and deemed it all bitter earnest enough, and learned their part speedily; and yet none too soon. For when the fleers of the Burg came home the Porte lost no time, but sent out another host to follow after the Champions and their spoil; for they had learned that those men had not turned about to Hampton after their victory, but had gone on to the Wheat-wearers.

"So it befell that the host of the Burg came up with the Champions on the eve of a summer day when there were yet three hours of daylight. But whereas they had looked to have an easy bargain of their foemen, since they knew the Champions to be but a few, lo! there was the hillside covered with a goodly array of spears and glaives and shining helms. They marvelled; but now for very shame, and because they scarce could help it, they fell on, and before sunset were scattered to the winds again, and the fleers had to bear back the tale that the more part of their foes were women of the Wheat-wearers; but this time few were those that came back alive to

the Burg of the Four Friths; for the freed captives were hot and eager in the chase, casting aside their shields and hauberks that they might speed the better, and valuing their lives at naught if they might but slay a man or two of the tyrants before they died.

"Thus was the Burg wounded with its own sword: but the matter stopped not there: for when that victorious host of men and women came into the land of the Wheat-wearers, all men fled away in terror at first, thinking that it was a new onset of the men of the Burg; and that all the more, as so many of them bore their weapons and armour. But when they found out how matters had gone, then, as ye may deem, was the greatest joy and exultation, and carles and queans both ran to arms and bade their deliverers learn them all that belonged to war, and said that one thing should not be lacking, to wit, the gift of their bodies, that should either lie dead in the fields, or bear about henceforth the souls of free men. Nothing lothe, the Champions became their doctors and teachers of battle, and a great host was drawn together; and meanwhile the Champions had sent messengers again to Hampton telling them what was befallen, and asking for more men if they might be had. But the Burg-abiders were not like to sit down under their foil. Another host they sent against the Wheat-wearers, not so huge, as well arrayed and wise in war. The Champions espied its goings, and knew well that they had to deal with the best men of the Burg, and they met them in like wise; for they chose the very best of the men and the women, and pitched on a place whence they might ward them well, and abode the foemen there; who failed not to come upon them, stout and stern and cold, and well-learned in all feats of war.

"Long and bitter was the battle, and the Burgers were fierce without head-strong folly, and the Wheat-wearers deemed that if they blenched now, they had something worse than death to look to. But in the end when both sides were grown weary and worn out, and yet neither would flee, on a sudden came into the field the help from the Dry Tree, a valiant company of riders to whom battle was but game and play. Then indeed the men of the Burg gave back and drew

out of the battle as best they might: yet were they little chased, save by the new-comers of the Dry Tree, for the others were over weary, and moreover the leaders had no mind to let the new-made warriors leave their vantage-ground lest the old and tried men-at-arms of the Burg should turn upon them and put them to the worse.

"Men looked for battle again the next day; but it fell not out so; for the host of the Burg saw that there was more to lose than to gain, so they drew back towards their own place. Neither did they waste the land much; for the riders of the Dry Tree followed hard at heel, and cut off all who tarried, or strayed from the main battle.

"When they were gone, then at last did the Wheat-wearers give themselves up to the joy of their deliverance and the pleasure of their new lives: and one of their old men that I have spoken with told me this; that before when they were little better than the thralls of the Burg, and durst scarce raise a hand against the foemen, the carles were but slow to love, and the queans, for all their fairness, cold and but little kind. However, now in the fields of the wheat-wearers themselves all this was changed, and men and maids took to arraying themselves gaily as occasion served, and there was singing and dancing on every green, and straying of couples amongst the greenery of the summer night; and in short the god of love was busy in the land, and made the eyes seem bright, and the lips sweet, and the bosom fair, and the arms sleek and the feet trim: so that every hour was full of allurement; and ever the nigher that war and peril was, the more delight had man and maid of each other's bodies.

"Well, within a while the Wheat-wearers were grown so full of hope that they bade the men of the Dry Tree lead them against the Burg of the Four Friths, and the Champions were ready thereto; because they wotted well, that, Hampton being disgarnished of men, the men of the Burg might fall on it; and even if they took it not, they would beset all ways and make riding a hard matter for their fellowship. So they fell to, wisely and deliberately, and led an host of the best of the carles with them, and bade the women keep their land surely, so that their host was not a great many. But so wisely they

led them that they came before the Burg well-nigh unawares; and though it seemed little likely that they should take so strong a place, yet nought less befell. For the Burg-dwellers beset with cruelty and bitter anger cried out that now at last they would make an end of this cursed people, and the whoreson strong-thieves their friends: so they went out a-gates a great multitude, but in worser order than their wont was; and there befell that marvel which sometimes befalleth even to very valiant men, that now at the pinch all their valour flowed from them, and they fled before the spears had met, and in such evil order that the gates could not be shut, and their foemen entered with them slaying and slaying even as they would. So that in an hour's space the pride and the estate of the Burg of the Four Friths was utterly fallen. Huge was the slaughter; for the Wheat-wearers deemed they had many a grief whereof to avenge them; nor were the men of the Dry Tree either sluggards or saints to be careless of their foemen, or to be merciful in the battle: but at last the murder was stayed: and then the men of the Wheat-wearers went from house to house in the town to find the women of their folk who had been made thralls by the Burgers. There then was many a joyful meeting betwixt those poor women and the men of their kindred: all was forgotten now of the days of their thralldom, their toil and mocking and stripes; and within certain days all the sort of them came before the host clad in green raiment, and garlanded with flowers for the joy of their deliverance; and great feast was made to them.

"As for them of the Burg, the battle and chase over, no more were slain, save that certain of the great ones were made shorter by the head. But the Champions and the Wheat-wearers both, said that none of that bitter and cruel folk should abide any longer in the town; so that after a delay long enough for them to provide stuff for their wayfaring, they were all thrust out a-gates, rich and poor, old and young, man, woman and child. Proudly and with a stout countenance they went, for now was their valour come again to them. And it is like that we shall hear of them oft again; for though they had but a few weapons amongst them when they were driven out of their old home, and neither hauberk

nor shield nor helm, yet so learned in war be they and so marvellous great of pride, that they will somehow get them weapons; and even armed but with headless staves, and cudgels of the thicket, woe betide the peaceful folk whom they shall first fall on. Yea, fair sir, the day shall come meseemeth when folk shall call on thee to lead the hunt after these famished wolves, and when thou dost so, call on me to tell thee tales of their doings which shall make thine heart hard, and thine hand heavy against them."

"Meantime," said Ralph, "what has betid to the Fellowship of the Dry Tree? for I see that thou hast some grief on thy mind because of them."

Roger kept silence a little and then he said: "I grieve because Hampton is no more a strong place of warriors; two or three carles and a dozen of women dwell now in the halls and chambers of the Scaur. Here on earth, all endeth. God send us to find the world without end!"

"What then," said Ralph, "have they then had another great overthrow, worse than that other?" "Nay," said Roger doggedly, "it is not so." "But where is the Fellowship?" said Ralph. "It is scattered abroad," quoth Roger. "For some of the Dry Tree had no heart to leave the women whom they had wooed in the Wheat-wearer's land: and some, and a great many, have taken their dears to dwell in the Burg of the Four Friths, whereas a many of the Wheat-wearers have gone to beget children on the old bondwomen of the Burgers; of whom there were some two thousand alive after the Burg was taken; besides that many women also came with the carles from their own land.

"So that now a mixed folk are dwelling in the Burg, partly of those women-thralls, partly of carles and queans come newly from the Wheat-wearers, partly of men of our Fellowship the more part of whom are wedded to queans of the Wheat-wearers, and partly of men, chapmen and craftsmen and others who have drifted into the town, having heard that there is no lack of wealth there, and many fair women unmated."

"Yea," said Ralph, "and is all this so ill?" Said Roger, "Meseems it is ill enough that there is no longer, rightly said,

a Fellowship of the Dry Tree, though the men be alive who were once of that fellowship." "Nay," said Ralph, "and why should they not make a new fellowship in the Burg, whereas they may well be peaceful, since they have come to their above of their foemen?"

"Yea," said Roger slowly, "that is sooth; and so is this, that there in the Burg they are a strong band, with a captain of their own, and much worshipped of the peaceful folk; and moreover, though they be not cruel to torment helpless folk, or hard to make an end of all joy to-day, lest they lose their joy to-morrow, they now array all men in good order within the Burg, so that it shall be no easier for a foeman to win that erst it was."

"What, man!" said Ralph, "then be of better cheer, and come thou with us, and may be the old steel of the champions may look on the sun down in Upmeads. Come thou with me, I say, and show me and my luck to some of thy fellows who are dwelling in the Burg, and it may be when thou hast told my tale to them, that some of them shall be content to leave their beds cold for a while, that they may come help a Friend of the Well in his need."

Roger sat silent as it he were pondering the matter, while Richard and the Sage, both of them, took up the word one after the other, and urged him to it.

At last he said: "Well, so be it for this adventure. Only I say not that I shall give up this hermitage and my holiness for ever. Come thou aside, wise man of Swevenham, and I shall tell thee wherefore." "Yea," said Ralph, laughing, "and when he hath told thee, tell me not again; for sure I am that he is right to go with us, and belike shall be wrong in his reason therefore."

Roger looked a little askance at him, and he went without doors with the Sage, and when they were out of earshot, he said to him: "Hearken, I would have gone with my lord at the first word, and have been fain thereof; but there is this woman that followeth him. At every turn she shall mind me of our Lady that was; and I shall loath her, and her fairness and the allurements of her body, because I see of her, that

she it is that hath gotten my Lady's luck, and that but for her my Lady might yet have been alive."

Said the Sage: "Well quoth my lord that thou wouldst give me a fool's reason! What! dost not thou know, thou that knowest so much of the Lady of Abundance, that she it was who ordained this Ursula to be Ralph's bedmate, when she herself should be gone from him, were she dead or alive, and that she also should be a Friend of the Well, so that he might not lack a fellow his life long? But this thou sayest, not knowing the mind of our Lady, and how she loved him in her inmost heart."

Roger hung his head and spake not for a while, and then he said: "Well, wise man, I have said that I will go on this adventure, and I will smooth my tongue for this while at least, and for what may come hereafter, let it be. And now we were best get to horse; for what with meat and minstrelsy, we have worn away the day till it wants but a little of noon. Go tell thy lord that I am ready. Farewell peace, and welcome war and grudging!"

So the Sage went within, and came out with the others, and they mounted their horses anon, and Roger went ahead on foot, and led them through the thicket-ways without fumbling; and they lay down that night on the farther side of the Swelling Flood.

CHAPTER 18

A Change of Days in the Burg of the Four Friths

There is naught to tell of their ways till they came out of the thicket into the fields about the Burg of the Four Friths; and even there was a look of a bettering of men's lives; though forsooth the husbandmen there were much the same as had abided in the fields aforetime, whereas they were not

for the most part freemen of the Burg, but aliens who did service in war and otherwise thereto. But, it being eventide, there were men and women and children, who had come out of gates, walking about and disporting themselves in the loveliness of early summer, and that in far merrier guise than they had durst do in the bygone days. Moreover, there was scarce a sword or spear to be seen amongst them, whereat Roger grudged somewhat, and Richard said: "Meseems this folk trusts the peace of the Burg overmuch, since, when all is told, unpeace is not so far from their borders."

But as they drew a little nigher Ralph pointed out to his fellows the gleam of helms and weapons on the walls, and they saw a watchman on each of the high towers of the south gate; and then quoth Roger: "Nay, the Burg will not be won so easily; and if a few fools get themselves slain outside it is no great matter."

Folk nowise let them come up to the gate unheeded, but gathered about them to look at the newcomers, but not so as to hinder them, and they could see that these summerers were goodly folk enough, and demeaned them as though they had but few troubles weighing on them. But the wayfarers were not unchallenged at the gate, for a stout man-at-arms stayed them and said: "Ye ride somewhat late, friends. What are ye?" Quoth Ralph: "We be peaceful wayfarers save to them that would fall on us, and we seek toward Upmeads." "Yea?" said the man, "belike ye shall find something less than peace betwixt here and Upmeads, for rumour goes that there are alien riders come into the lands of Higham, and for aught I know the said unpeace may spread further on. Well, if ye will go to the Flower de Luce and abide there this night, ye shall have a let-pass to-morn betimes."

Then Ralph spake a word in Roger's ear, and Roger nodded his head, and, throwing his cowl aback, went up to the man-at-arms and said: "Stephen a-Hurst, hast thou time for a word with an old friend?" "Yea, Roger," said the man, "is it verily thou? I deemed that thou hadst fled away from all of us to live in the wilds."

"So it was, lad," said Roger, "but times change from good

to bad and back again; and now am I of this good lord's company; and I shall tell thee, Stephen, that though he rideth but few to-day, yet merry shall he be that rideth with him to-morrow if unpeace be in the land. Lo you, Stephen, this is the Child of Upmeads, whom belike thou hast heard of; and if thou wilt take me into the chamber of thy tower, I will tell thee things of him that thou wottest not."

Stephen turned to Ralph and made obeisance to him and said: "Fair Sir, there are tales going about concerning thee, some whereof are strange enow, but none of them ill; and I deem by the look of thee that thou shalt be both a stark champion and a good lord; and I deem that it shall be my good luck, if I see more of thee, and much more. Now if thou wilt, pass on with thine other fellows to the Flower de Luce, and leave this my old fellow-in-arms with me, and he shall tell me of thy mind; for I see that thou wouldest have somewhat of us; and since, I doubt not by the looks of thee, that thou wilt not bid us aught unknightly, when we know thy will, we shall try to pleasure thee."

"Yea, Lord Ralph," said Roger, "thou mayest leave all the business with me, and I will come to thee not later than betimes to-morrow, and let thee wot how matters have sped. And methinks ye may hope to wend out-a-gates this time otherwise than thou didest before."

So Ralph gave him yeasay and thanked the man-at-arms and rode his ways with the others toward the Flower de Luce, and whereas the sun was but newly set, Ralph noted that the booths were gayer and the houses brighter and more fairly adorned than aforetimes. As for the folk, they were such that the streets seemed full of holiday makers, so joyous and well dight were they; and the women like to those fair thralls whom he had seen that other time, saving that they were not clad so wantonly, however gaily. They came into the great square, and there they saw that the masons and builders had begun on the master church to make it fairer and bigger; the people were sporting there as in the streets, and amongst them were some weaponed men, but the most part of these bore the token of the Dry Tree.

So they entered the Flower de Luce, and had good wel-

come there, as if they were come home to their own house; for when its people saw such a goodly old man in the Sage, and so stout and trim a knight as was Richard, and above all when they beheld the loveliness of Ralph and Ursula, they praised them open-mouthed, and could scarce make enough of them. And when they had had their meat and were rested, came two of the maids there and asked them if it were lawful to talk with them; and Ralph laughed and bade them sit by them, and eat a dainty morsel; and they took that blushing, for they were fair and young, and Ralph's face and the merry words of his mouth stirred the hearts within them: and forsooth it was not so much they that spake as Ursula and the Sage; for Ralph was somewhat few spoken, whereas he pondered concerning the coming days, and what he half deemed that he saw a-doing at Upmeads. But at last they found their tongues, and said how that already rumour was abroad that they were in the Burg who had drunk of the Water of the Well at the World's End; and said one: "It is indeed a fair sight to see you folk coming back in triumph; and so methinks will many deem if ye abide with us over to-morrow, and yet, Lady, for a while we are well-nigh as joyous as ye can be, whereas we have but newly come into new life also: some of us from very thralldom of the most grievous, and I am of those; and some of us in daily peril of it, like to my sister here. So mayhappen," said she, smiling, "none of us shall seek to the Well until we have worn our present bliss a little threadbare."

Ursula smiled on her, but the Sage said: "Mayhappen it is of no avail speaking of such things to a young and fair woman; but what would betide you if the old Burgers were to come back and win their walls again?" The maid who had been a thrall changed countenance at his word; but the other one said: "If the Burgers come back, they will find them upon the walls who have already chaced them. Thou mayst deem me slim and tender, old wise man; but such as mine arm is, it has upheaved the edges against the foe; and if it be a murder to slay a Burger, then am I worthy of the gallows." "Yea, yea," quoth Richard, laughing, "ye shall be double-

manned then in this good town: ye may well win, unless the sight of you shall make the foe over fierce for the gain."

Said the Sage: "It is well, maiden, and if ye hold to that, and keep your carles in the same road, ye need not to fear the Burgers: and to say sooth, I have it in my mind, that before long ye shall have both war and victory."

Then Ralph seemed to wake up as from a dream, and he arose, and said: "Thou art in the right, Sage, and to mine eyes it seemeth that both thou and I shall be sharers in the war and the victory." And therewith he fell to striding up and down the hall, while the two maidens sat gazing on him with gleaming eyes and flushed cheeks.

But in a little while he came back to his seat and sat him down, and fell to talk with the women, and asked them of the town and the building therein, and the markets, whether they throve; and they and two or three of the townsmen or merchants answered all, and told him how fair their estate was, and how thriving was the lot of one and all with them. Therewith was Ralph well pleased, and they sat talking there in good fellowship till the night was somewhat worn, and all men fared to bed.

CHAPTER 19

Ralph Sees Hampton and the Scaur

When it was morning Ralph arose and went into the hall of the hostelry, and even as he entered it the outside door opened, and in came Roger, and Richard with him (for he had been astir very early) and Roger, who was armed from head to foot and wore a coat of the Dry Tree, cried out: "Now, Lord, thou wert best do on thy war-gear, for thou shalt presently be captain of an host." "Yea, Roger," quoth Ralph, "and hast thou done well?" "Well enough," said Rich-

ard; "thine host shall not be a great one, but no man in it will be a blencher, for they be all champions of the Dry Tree."

"Yea," quoth Roger, "so it was that Stephen a-Hurst brought me to a company of my old fellows, and we went all of us together to the Captain of the Burg (e'en he of the Dry Tree, who in these latest days is made captain of all), and did him to wit that thou hadst a need; and whereas he, as all of us, had heard of the strokes that thou struckest in the wood that day when thy happiness first began, (woe worth the while!) he stickled not to give some of us leave to look on the hand-play with thee. But soft, my Lord! abound not in thanks as yet, till I tell thee. The said Captain hath gotten somewhat of the mind of a chapman by dwelling in a town, 'tis like (the saints forgive me for saying so!) and would strike a bargain with thee." "Yea," said Ralph, smiling, "I partly guess what like the bargain is; but say thou."

Said Roger: "I like not his bargain, not for thy sake but mine own; this it is, that we shall ride, all of us who are to be of thy fellowship, to the Castle of the Scaur to-day, and there thy Lady shall sit in the throne whereas in past days our Lady and Queen was wont to sit; and that thou shalt swear upon her head, that whensoever he biddeth thee come to the help of the Burg of the Four Friths and the tribes of the Wheat-wearers, thou shalt come in arms by the straightest road with such fellowship as thou mayst gather; and if thou wilt so do, we of the Dry Tree who go with thee on this journey are thine to save or to spend by flood or field, or castle wall, amidst the edges and the shafts and the fire-flaught. What sayest thou—thou who art lucky, and hast of late become wise? And I will tell thee, that though I hope it not, yet I would thou shouldst naysay it; for it will be hard for me to see another woman sitting in our Lady's seat: yea, to see her sitting there, who hath stolen her luck."

Said Ralph: "Now this proffer of the Captain's I call friendly and knightly, and I will gladly swear as he will; all the more as without any oath I should never fail him whensoever he may send for me. As for thee, Roger, ride with us

if thou wilt, and thou shalt be welcome both in the company, and at the High House of Upmeads whenso we come there."

Then was Roger silent, but nowise abashed; and as they spoke they heard the tramp of horses and the clash of weapons, and they saw through the open door three men-at-arms riding up to the house; so Ralph went out to welcome them; they were armed full well in bright armour, and their coats were of the Dry Tree, and were tall men and warrior-like. They hailed Ralph as captain, and he gave them the sele of the day and bade come in and drink a cup; so did they, but they were scarce off their horses ere there came another three, and then six together, and so one after other till the hall of the Flower de Luce was full of the gleam of steel and clash of armour, and the lads held their horses without and were merry with the sight of the stalwart men-at-arms. Now cometh Ursula down from her chamber clad in her bravery; and when they saw her they set up a shout for joy of her, so that the rafters rang again; but she laughed for pleasure of them, and poured them out the wine, till they were merrier with the sight of her than with the good liquor.

Now Roger comes to Ralph and tells him that he deems his host hath come to the last man. Then Ralph armed him, and those two maidens brought him his horse, and they mount all of them and draw up in the Square; and Roger and Stephen a-Hurst array them, for they were chosen of them as leaders along with Ralph, and Richard, whom they all knew, at least by hearsay. Then Roger drew from his pouch a parchment, and read the roll of names, and there was no man lacking, and they were threescore save five, besides Roger and the way-farers, and never was a band of like number seen better; and Richard said softly unto Ralph: "If we had a few more of these, I should care little what foemen we should meet in Upmeads: soothly, my lord, they had as well have ridden into red Hell as into our green fields." "Fear not, Richard," said Ralph, "we shall have enough."

So then they rode out of the Square and through the streets to the North Gate, and much folk was abroad to look on them, and they blessed them as they went, both carles and queans; for the rumour was toward that there was riding a

good and dear Lord and a Friend of the Well to get his own again from out of the hands of the aliens.

Herewith they ride a little trot through the Freedom of the Burg, and when they were clear of it they turned aside from the woodland highway whereon Ralph had erst ridden with Roger and followed the rides a good way till it was past noon, when they came into a very close thicket where there was but a narrow and winding way whereon two men might not ride abreast, and Roger said: "Now, if we were the old Burgers, and the Dry Tree still holding the Scaur, we should presently know what steel-point dinner meaneth; if the dead could rise out of their graves to greet their foemen, we should anon be a merry company here. But at last they learned the trick, and were wont to fetch a compass round about Grey Goose Thicket as it hight amongst us."

"Well," said Ralph, "but how if there by any waylaying us; the Burgers may be wiser still than thou deemest, and ye may have learned them more than thou art minded to think."

"Nay," said Roger, "I bade a half score turn aside by the thicket path on our left hands; that shall make all sure; but indeed I look for no lurkers as yet. In a month's time that may betide, but not yet; not yet. But tell me, fair Sir, have ye any deeming of where thou mayst get thee more folk who be not afraid of the hard hand-play? For Richard hath been telling me that there be tidings in the air."

Said Ralph: "If hope play me not false, I look to gather some stout carles of the Shepherd Country." "Yea," said Roger, "but I shall tell thee that they have been at whiles unfriends of the Dry Tree." Said Ralph: "I think they will be friends unto me." "Then it shall do well," said Roger, "for they be good in a fray."

So talked they as they rode, but ever Roger would give no heed to Ursula, but made as if he wotted not that she was there, though ever and anon Ralph would be turning back to speak to her and help her through the passes.

At last the thicket began to dwindle, and presently riding out of a little valley or long trench on to a ridge nearly bare of trees, they saw below them a fair green plain, and in the midst of it a great heap of grey rocks rising out of it like a

reef out of the sea, and on the said reef, and climbing up as it were to the topmost of it, the white walls of a great castle, the crown whereof was a huge round tower. At the foot of the ridge was a thorp of white houses thatched with straw scattered over a good piece of the plain. The company drew rein on the ridge-top, and the Champions raised a great shout at the sight of their old strong-place; and Roger turned to Ralph and said: "Fair Sir, how deemest thou of the Castle of the Scaur?" but Richard broke in: "For my part, friend Roger, I deem that ye do like to people unlearned in war to leave the stronghold ungarnished of men. This is a fool's deed." "Nay, nay," said Roger, "we need not be over-hasty, while it is our chief business to order the mingled folk of the Wheat-wearers and others who dwell in the Burg as now."

Then spake Ralph: "Yet how wilt thou say but that the foemen whom we go to meet in Upmeads may be some of those very Burgers: hast thou heard whether they have found a new dwelling among some unhappy folk, or be still roving: maybe they shall deem Upmeads fair."

Spake Michael a-Hurst: "By thy leave, fair Sir, we have had a word of those riders and strong-thieves that they have fetched a far compass, and got them armour, and be come into the woodland north of the Wood Debateable. For like all strong-thieves, they love the wood."

Roger laughed: "Yea, as we did, friend Michael, when we were thieves; whereas now we be lords and gentlemen. But as to thy tidings, I set not much by them; for of the same message was this word that they had already fallen on Higham by the Way; and we know that this cannot be true; since though forsooth the Abbot has had unpeace on his hands, we know where his foemen came from, the West to wit, and the Banded Barons."

"Yea, yea," quoth the Sage, "but may not the Burgers have taken service with them?" "Yea, forsooth," quoth Roger, "but I deem not, or we had been surer thereof."

Thus they spake, and they lighted down all of them to breathe their horses, and Ursula spake with Ralph as they walked the greensward together a little apart, and said: "Sweetheart, I am afraid of to-day."

"Yea, dear," said he, "and wherefore?" She said: "It will be hard for me to enter that grim house yonder, and sit in the seat whence I was erewhile threatened by the evil hag with hair like a grey she-bear."

He made much of her and said: "Yet belike a Friend of the Well may overcome this also; and withal the hall shall be far other to-day when it was."

She looked about on the warriors as they lay on the grass or loitered by their horses; then she smiled, and her face lightened, and she reddened and cast down her eyes and said: "Yea, that is sooth; that day there were few men in the hall, and they old and evil of semblance. It was a band of women who took me in the thorp and brought me up into the Castle, and mishandled me there, and cast me into prison there; whereas these be good fellows, and frank and free of aspect. But O, my heart, look thou how fearful the piled-up rocks rise from the plain and the walls wind up amongst them; and that huge tower, the crown of all! Surely there is none more fearful in the world."

He kissed her and laughed merrily, and said: "Yea, sweetheart, and there will be another change in the folk of the hall when we come there this time, to wit, that thou shouldst not be alone therein, even were all these champions, and Richard and the Sage away from thee. Wilt thou tell me how that shall be?"

She turned to him and kissed him and caressed him, and then they turned back again toward their fellows, for by now they had walked together a good way along the ridge.

So then they gat to horse again and rode into the thorp, where men and women stood about to behold them, and made them humble reverence as they passed by. So rode they to the bailly of the Castle; and if that stronghold looked terrible from the ridge above, tenfold more terrible of aspect it was when the upper parts were hidden by the grey rocks, and they so huge and beetling, and though the sun was bright about them, and they in the midst of their friends, yet even Ralph felt somewhat of dread creep over him: yet he smiled cheerfully as Ursula turned an anxious face on him. They alighted from their horses in the bailly, for over steep for

horse-hoofs was the walled way upward; and as they began to mount, even the merry Champions hushed their holiday clamour for awe of the huge stronghold, and Ralph took Ursula by the hand, and she sidled up to him, and said softly: "Yea, it was here they drave me up, those women, thrusting and smiting me; and some would have stripped off my raiment, but one who seemed the wisest, said, 'Nay, leave her till she come before the ancient Lady, for her gear may be a token of whence she is, and whither, if she be come as a spy.' So I escaped them for that moment. And now I wonder what we shall find in the hall when we come in thither. It is somewhat like to me, as when one gets up from bed in the dead night, when all is quiet and the moon is shining, and goes out of the chamber into the hall, and coming back, almost dreads to see some horror lying in one's place amid the familiar bedclothes."

And she grew paler as she spake. Then Ralph comforted her and trimmed his countenance to a look of mirth, but inwardly he was ill at ease.

So up they went and up, till they came to a level place whereon was built the chief hall and its chambers: there they stood awhile to breathe them before the door, which was rather low than great; and Ursula clung to Ralph and trembled, but Ralph spake in her ear: "Take heart, my sweet, or these men, and Roger in especial, will think the worse of thee; and thou a Friend of the Well. What! here is naught to hurt thee! this is naught beside the perils of the desert, and the slaves and the evil lord of Utterbol." "Yea," she said, "but meseemeth I loved thee not so sore as now I do. O friend, I am become a weak woman and unvaliant, and there is naught in me but love of thee, and love of life because of thee; nor dost thou know altogether what befell me in that hall."

But Ralph turned about and cried out in a loud, cheerful voice: "Let us enter, friends! and lo you, I will show the Champions of the Dry Tree the way into their own hall and high place." Therewith he thrust the door open, for it was not locked, and strode into the hall, still leading Ursula by the hand, and all the company followed him, the clash of their

armour resounding through the huge building. Though it was long, it was not so much that it was long as that it was broad, and exceeding high, so that in the dusk of it the great vault of the roof was dim and misty. There was no man therein, no halling on its walls, no benches nor boards, naught but the great standing table of stone on the dais, and the stone high-seat amidst of it: and the place did verily seem like the house and hall of a people that had died out in one hour because of their evil deeds.

They stood still a moment when they were all fairly within doors, and Roger thrust up to Ralph and said, but softly: "The woman is blenching, and all for naught; were it not for the oath, we had best have left her in the thorp: I fear me she will bring evil days on our old home with her shivering fear. How far otherwise came our Lady in hither when first she came amongst us, when the Duke of us found her in the wood after she had been thrust out from Sunway by the Baron whom thou slewest afterward. Our Duke brought her in hither wrapped up in his knight's scarlet cloak, and went up with her on to the dais; but when she came thither, she turned about and let her cloak fall to earth, and stood there barefoot in her smock, as she had been cast out into the wildwood, and she spread abroad her hands, and cried out in a loud voice as sweet as the May blackbird, 'May God bless this House and the abode of the valiant, and the shelter of the hapless.' "

Said Ursula (and her voice was firm and the colour come back to her cheeks now, while Ralph stood agaze and wondering): "Roger, thou lovest me little, meseemeth, though if I did less than I do, I should do against the will of thy Lady that was Queen in this hall. But tell me, Roger, where is gone that other one, the fearful she-bear of this crag, who sat in yonder stone high-seat, and roared at me and mocked me, and gave me over into the hands of her tormentors, who haled me away to the prison wherefrom thy very Lady delivered me?"

"Lady," said Roger, "the tale of her is short since the day thou sawest her herein. On the day when we first had the evil tidings of the slaying of my Lady we were sad at heart, and

called to mind ancient transgressions against us; therefore we fell on the she-bear, as thou callest her, and her company of men and women, and some we slew and some we thrust forth; but as to her, I slew her not three feet from where thou standest now. A rumour there is that she walketh, and it may be so; yet in the summer noon ye need not look to see her."

Ralph said coldly: "Roger, let us be done with minstrels' tales; lead me to the place where the oath is to be sworn, for time presses."

Scarce were the words out of his mouth ere Roger strode foward and gat him on to the dais and went hastily to the wall behind the high-seat, whence he took down a very great horn, and set it to his lips and winded it loudly thrice, so that the great and high hall was full of its echoes. Richard started thereat and half drew his sword; but the Sage put his hand upon the hilts, and said: "It is naught, let the edges lie quiet." Ursula stared astonished, but now she quaked no more; Ralph changed not countenance a wit, and the champions of the Tree made as if naught had been done that they looked not for. But thereafter cried Roger from the dais: "This is the token that the men of the Dry Tree are met for matters of import; thus is the Mote hallowed. Come up hither, ye aliens, and ye also of the fellowship, that the oath may be sworn, and we may go our ways, even as the alien captain biddeth."

Then Ralph took Ursula's hand again, and went up the hall calmly and proudly, and the champions followed with Richard and the Sage. Ralph and Ursula went up on to the dais, and he set down Ursula in the stone high-seat, and even in the halldusk a right fair-coloured picture she looked therein; for she was clad in a goodly green gown broidered with flowers, and a green cloak with gold orphreys over it; her hair was spread abroad over her shoulders, and on her head was a garland of roses which the women of the Flower de Luce had given her; so there she sat with her fair face, whence now all the wrinkles of trouble and fear were smoothed out, looking like an image of the early summer-tide itself. And the champions looked on her and marvelled, and

one whispered to the other that it was their Lady of aforetime come back again; only Roger, who had now gone back to the rest of the fellowship, cast his eyes upon the ground, and muttered.

Now Ralph draws his sword, and lays it naked on the stone table, and he stood beside Ursula and said: "Champions of the Dry Tree, by the blade of Upmeads which lieth here before me, and by the head which I love best in the world, and is best worthy of love" (and herewith he laid his hand on Ursula's head), "I swear that whensoever the Captain of the Dry Tree calleth on me, whether I be eating or drinking, abed or standing on my feet, at peace or at war, glad or sorry, I shall do my utmost to come to his aid straightway with whatso force I may gather. Is this rightly sworn, Champions?"

Said Stephen a-Hurst: "It is sworn well and knightly, and now cometh our oath."

"Nay," said Ralph, "I had no mind to drive a bargain with you; your deeds shall prove you; and I fear not for your doughtiness."

Said Stephen: "Yea, Lord; but he bade us swear to thee. Reach me thy sword, I pray thee."

Then Ralph reached him his sword across the great stone table, and Stephen took it, and kissed the blade and the hilts; and then lifted up his voice and said: "By the hilts and the blade, by the point and the edge, we swear to follow the Lord Ralph of Upmeads for a year and a day, and to do his will in all wise. So help us God and Allhallows!"

And therewith he gave the sword to the others, and each man of them kissed it as he had.

But Ralph said: "Champions, for this oath I thank you all heartily. But it is not my meaning that I should hold you by me for a year, whereas I deem I shall do all that my kindred may need in three days' space from the first hour wherein we set foot in Upmeads."

Stephen smiled friendly at him and nodded, and said: "That may well be; but now to make a good end of this mote I will tell thee a thing; to wit, that our Captain, yea, and all we, are minded to try thee by this fray in Upmeads, now we

know that thou hast become a Friend of the Well. And if thou turn out as we deem is likest, we will give thee this Castle of the Scaur, for thee and those that shall spring from thy loins; for we deem that some such man as thou will be the only one to hold it worthily, and in such wise as it may be a stronghold against tyrants and for the helping of peaceable folk; since forsooth, we of the Dry Tree have heard somewhat of the Well at the World's End, and trow in the might thereof."

He made an end; and Ralph kept silence and pondered the matter. But Roger lifted up his head and broke in, and said: "Yea, yea! that is it: we are all become men of peace, we riders of the Dry Tree!" And he laughed withal, but as one nowise best pleased.

But as Ralph was gathering his words together, and Ursula was looking up to him with trouble in her face again, came a man of the thorp rushing into the hall, and cried out: "O, my lords! there are weaponed men coming forth from the thicket. Save us, we pray you, for we are ill-weaponed and men of peace."

Roger laughed, and said: "Eh, good man! So ye want us back again? But my Lord Ralph, and thou Richard, and thou Stephen, come ye to the shot-window here, that giveth on to the forest. We are high up here, and we shall see all as clearly as in a good mirror. Hast thou shut the gates, carle?" "Yea, Lord Roger," quoth he, "and there are some fifty of us together down in the base-court."

Ralph and Richard and Stephen looked forth from the shot window, and saw verily a band of men riding down the bent into the thorp, and Ralph, who as aforesaid was far-sighted and clear-sighted, said: "Yea, it is strange: but without doubt these are riders of the Dry Tree; and they seem to me to be some ten-score. Thou Stephen, thou Roger, what is to hand? Is your Captain wont to give a gift and take it back . . . and somewhat more with it?" Stephen looked abashed at his word; and Roger hung his head again.

But therewith the Sage drew up to them and said: "Be not dismayed, Lord Ralph. What wert thou going to say to the Champions when this carle brake in?"

"This," said Ralph, "that I thanked the Dry Tree heartily for its gift, but that meseemed it naught wise to leave this stronghold disgarnished of men till I can come or send back from Upmeads."

Stephen's face cleared at the word, and he said: "I bid thee believe it, lord, that there is no treason in our Captain's heart; and that if there were I would fight against him and his men on thy behalf." And Roger, though in a somewhat surly voice, said the like.

Ralph thought a little, and then he said: "It is well; go we down and out of gates to meet them, that we may the sooner get on our way to Upmeads." And without more words he went up to Ursula and took her hand and went out of the hall, and down the rock-cut stair, and all they with him. And when they came into the Base-court, Ralph spoke to the carles of the thorp, who stood huddled together sore afeard, and said: "Throw open the gates. These riders who have so scared you are naught else than the Champions of the Dry Tree who are coming back to their stronghold that they may keep you sure against wicked tyrants who would oppress you."

The carles looked askance at one another, but straightway opened the gates, and Ralph and his company went forth, and abode the new-comers on a little green mound half a bowshot from the Castle. Ralph sat down on the grass and Ursula by him, and she said: "My heart tells me that these Champions are no traitors, however rough and fierce they have been, and still shall be if occasion serve. But O, sweetheart, how dear and sweet is this sunlit greensward after yonder grim hold. Surely, sweet, it shall never be our dwelling?"

"I wot not, beloved," said he; "must we not go and dwell where deeds shall lead us? and the hand of Weird is mighty. But lo thou, here are the newcomers to hand!"

So it was as he said, and presently the whole band came before them, and they were all of the Dry Tree, stout men and well weaponed, and they had ridden exceeding fast, so that their horses were somewhat spent. A tall man very gallantly armed, who rode at their head, leapt at once from his horse

and came up to Ralph and hailed him, and Roger and Stephen both made obeisance to him. Ralph, who had risen up, hailed him in his turn, and the tall man said: "I am the Captain of the Dry Tree for lack of a better; art thou Ralph of Upmeads, fair sir?" "Even so," said Ralph.

Said the Captain: "Thou wilt marvel that I have ridden after thee on the spur; so here is the tale shortly. Your backs were not turned on the walls of the Burg an hour, ere three of my riders brought in to me a man who said, and gave me tokens of his word being true, that he had fallen in with a company of the old Burgers in the Wood Debateable, which belike thou wottest of."

"All we of Upmeads wot of it," said Ralph. "Well," said the Captain, "amongst these said Burgers, who were dwelling in the wildwood in summer content, the word went free that they would gather to them other bands of strong-thieves who haunt that wood, and go with them upon Upmeads, and from Upmeads, when they were waxen strong, they would fall upon Higham by the Way, and thence with yet more strength on their old dwelling of the Burg. Now whereas I know that thou art of Upmeads, and also what thou art, and what thou hast done, I have ridden after thee to tell thee what is toward. But if thou deemest I have brought thee all these riders it is not wholly so. For it was borne into my mind that our old stronghold was left bare of men, and I knew not what might betide; and that the more, as more than one man has told us how that another band of the disinherited Burgers have fallen upon Higham or the lands thereof, and Higham is no great way hence; so that some five score of these riders are to hold our Castle of the Scaur, and the rest are for thee to ride afield with. As for the others, thou hast been told already that the Scaur, and Hampton therewith is a gift from us to thee; for henceforward we be the lords of the Burg of the Four Friths, and that is more than enough for us."

Ralph thanked the Captain for this, and did him to wit that he would take the gift if he came back out the Upmeads fray alive: said he, "With thee and the Wheat-wearers in the Burg, and me in the Scaur, no strong-thief shall dare lift up his hand in these parts."

The Captain smiled, and Ralph went on: "And now I must needs ask thee for leave to depart; which is all the more needful, wheras thy men have over-ridden their horses, and we must needs go a soft pace till we come to Higham."

"Yea, art thou for Higham, fair sir?" said the Captain. "That is well; for ye may get men therefrom, and at the least it is like that ye shall hear tidings: as to my men and their horses, this hath been looked to. For five hundred good men of the Wheat-wearers, men who have not learned the feat of arms a-horseback, are coming through the woods hither to help ward thy castle, fair lord; they will be here in some three hours' space and will bring horses for thy five score men, therefore do ye but ride softly to Higham and if these sergeants catch up with you it is well, but if not, abide them at Higham."

"Thanks have thou for this once more," said Ralph; "and now I have no more word than this for thee; that I will come to thee at thy least word, and serve thee with all that I have, to my very life if need be. And yet I must say this, that I wot not why ye and these others are become to me, who am alien to you, as very brothers." Said the Captain: "There is this to be said of it, as was aforesaid, that all we count thy winning of the Well at the World's End as valiancy in thee, yea, and luck withal. But, moreover, she who was Our Lady would have had thee for her friend had she lived, and how then could we be less than friends to thee? Depart in peace, my friend, and we look to see thee again in a little while."

Therewith he kissed him, and bade farewell; and Ralph bade his band to horse, and they were in the saddle in a twinkling, and rode away from Hampton at a soft pace.

But as they went, Ralph turned to Ursula and said: "And now belike shall we see Bourton Abbas once more, and the house where first I saw thee. And O how sweet thou wert! And I was so happy and so young."

"Yea," she said, "and sorely I longed for thee, and now we have long been together, as it seemeth; and yet that long space shall be but a little while of our lives. But, my friend, as to Bourton Abbas, I misdoubt me of our seeing it; for there is a nigher road by the by-ways to Higham, which these

men know, and doubtless that way we shall wend; and I am glad thereof; for I shall tell thee, that somewhat I fear that thorp, lest it should lay hold of me, and wake me from a dream."

"Yea," said Ralph, "but even then, belike thou shouldst find me beside thee; as if I had fallen asleep in the ale-house, and dreamed of the Well at the World's End, and then awoke and seen the dear barefoot maiden busying her about her house and its matters. That were naught so ill."

"Ah," she said, "look round on thy men, and think of the might of war that is in them, and think of the deeds to come. But O how I would that these next few days were worn away, and we yet alive for a long while."

CHAPTER 20

They Come to the Gate of Higham By the Way

It was as Ursula had deemed, and they made for Higham by the shortest road, so that they came before the gate a little before sunset: to the very gate they came not; for there were strong barriers before it, and men-at-arms within them, as though they were looking for an onfall. And amongst these were bowmen who bended their bows on Ralph and his company. So Ralph stayed his men, and rode up to the barriers with Richard and Stephen a-Hurst, all three of them bareheaded with their swords in the sheaths; and Stephen moreover bearing a white cloth on a truncheon. Then a knight of the town, very bravely armed, came forth from the barriers and went up to Ralph, and said: "Fair sir, art thou a knight?" "Yea," said Ralph. Said the knight, "Who be ye?" "I hight Ralph of Upmeads," said Ralph, "and these be my men: and we pray thee for guesting in the town of my Lord Abbot to-night, and leave to depart to-morrow betimes."

"O unhappy young man," said the knight, "meseems these men be not so much thine as thou art theirs; for they are of the Dry Tree, and bear their token openly. Wilt thou then lodge thy company of strong-thieves with honest men?"

Stephen a-Hurst laughed roughly at this word, but Ralph said mildly: "These men are indeed of the Dry Tree, but they are my men and under my rule, and they be riding on my errands, which be lawful."

The knight was silent a while and then he said: "Well, it may be so; but into this town they come not, for the tale of them is over long for honest men to hearken to."

Even as he spake, a man-at-arms somewhat evilly armed shoved through the barriers, thrusting aback certain of his fellows, and, coming up to Ralph, stood staring up into his face with the tears starting into his eyes. Ralph looked a moment, and then reached down his arms to embrace him, and kissed his face; for lo! it was his own brother Hugh. Withal he whispered in his ear: "Get thee behind us, Hugh, if thou wilt come with us, lad." So Hugh passed on quietly toward the band, while Ralph turned to the knight again, who said to him, "Who is that man?" "He is mine own brother," said Ralph. "Be he the brother of whom he will," said the knight, "he was none the less our sworn man. Ye fools," said he, turning toward the men in the barrier, "why did ye not slay him?" "He slipped out," said they, "before we wotted what he was about." Said the knight, "Where were your bows, then?"

Said a man: "They were pressing so hard on the barrier, that we could not draw a bowstring. Besides, how might we shoot him without hitting thee, belike?"

The knight turned toward Ralph, grown wroth and surly, and that the more he saw Stephen and Richard grinning; he said: "Fair sir, ye have strengthened the old saw that saith, Tell me what thy friends are, and I will tell thee what thou art. Thou hast stolen our man with not a word on it."

"Fair sir," said Ralph, "meseemeth thou makest more words than enough about it. Shall I buy my brother of thee, then? I have a good few pieces in my pouch." The captain shook his head angrily.

"Well," said Ralph, "how can I please thee, fair sir?"

Quoth the knight: "Thou canst please me best by turning thy horses' heads away from Higham, all the sort of you." He stepped back toward the barriers, and then came forward again, and said: "Look you, man-at-arms, I warn thee that I trust thee not, and deem that thou liest. Now have I mind to issue out and fall upon you: for ye shall be evil guests in my Lord Abbot's lands."

Now at last Ralph waxed somewhat wroth, and he said: "Come out then, if you will, and we shall meet you man for man; there is yet light on this lily lea, and we will do so much for thee, churl though thou be."

But as he spoke, came the sounds of horns, and lo, over the bent showed the points of spears, and then all those five-score of the Dry Tree whom the captain had sent after Ralph came pouring down the bent. The knight looked on them under the sharp of his hand, till he saw the Dry Tree on their coats also, and then he turned and gat him hastily into the barriers; and when he was amongst his own men he fell to roaring out a defiance to Ralph, and a bolt flew forth, and two or three shafts, but hurt no one. Richard and Stephen drew their swords, but Ralph cried out: "Come away, friends, tarry not to bicker with these fools, who are afraid of they know not what: it is but lying under the naked heaven to-night instead of under the rafters, but we have all lodged thus a many times: and we shall be nigher to our journey's end to-morrow when we wake up."

Therewith he turned his horse with Richard and Stephen and came to his own men. There was much laughter and jeering at the Abbot's men amidst of the Dry Tree, both of those who had ridden with Ralph, and the new-comers; but they arrayed them to ride further in good order, and presently were skirting the walls of Higham out of bow-shot, and making for the Down country by the clear of the moon. The sergeants had gotten a horse for Hugh, and by Ralph's bidding he rode beside him as they went their ways, and the two brethren talked together lovingly.

CHAPTER 21

Talk Between Those Two Brethren

Ralph asked Hugh first if he wotted aught of Gregory their brother. Hugh laughed and pointed to Higham, and said: "He is yonder." "What," said Ralph, "in the Abbot's host?" "Yea," said Hugh, laughing again, "but in his spiritual, not his worldly host: he is turned monk, brother; that is, he is already a novice, and will be a brother of the Abbey in six months' space." Said Ralph: "And Launcelot Long-tongue, thy squire, how hath he sped?" Said Hugh: "He is yonder also, but in the worldly host, not the spiritual: he is a sergeant of theirs, and somewhat of a catch for them, for he is no ill man-at-arms, as thou wottest, and besides he adorneth everything with words, so that men hearken to him gladly."

"But tell me," said Ralph, "how it befalleth that the Abbot's men of war be so churlish, and chary of the inside of their town; what have they to fear? Is not the Lord Abbot still a mighty man?" Hugh shook his head: "There hath been a change of days at Higham; though I say not but that the knights are over careful, and much over fearful." "What has the change been?" said Ralph. Hugh said: "In time past my Lord Abbot was indeed a mighty man, and both this town of Higham was well garnished of men-at-arms, and also many of his manors had castles and strong-houses on them, and the yeomen were ready to run to their weapons whenso the gathering was blown. In short, Higham was as mighty as it was wealthy; and the Abbot's men had naught to do with any, save with thy friends here who bear the Tree Leafless; all else feared those holy walls and the well-blessed men who warded them. But the Dry Tree feared, as men said, neither man nor devil (and I hope it may be so still since they are

become thy friends), and they would whiles lift in the Abbot's lands when they had no merrier business on hand, and not seldom came to their above in their dealings with his men. But all things come to an end; for, as I am told, some year and a half ago, the Abbot had debate with the Westland Barons, who both were and are ill men to deal with, being both hungry and doughty. The quarrel grew till my Lord must needs defy them, and to make a long tale short, he himself in worldly armour led his host against them, and they met some twenty miles to the west in the field of the Wry Bridge, and there was Holy Church overthrown; and the Abbot, who is as valiant a man as ever sang mass, though not over-wise in war, would not flee, and as none would slay him, might they help it, they had to lead him away, and he sits to this day in their strongest castle, the Red Mount west-away. Well, he being gone, and many of his wisest warriors slain, the rest ran into gates again; but when the Westlanders beset Higham and thought to have it good cheap, the monks and their men warded it not so ill but that the Westlanders broke their teeth over it. Forsooth, they turned away thence and took most of the castles and strong-houses of the Abbot's lands; burned some and put garrisons into others, and drave away a mighty spoil of chattels and men and women, so that the lands of Higham are half ruined; and thereby the monks, though they be stout enough within their walls, will not suffer their men to ride abroad. Whereby, being cooped up in a narrow place, and with no deeds to hand to cheer their hearts withal, they are grown sour and churlish."

"But, brother," said Ralph, "howsoever churlish they may be, and howso timorous, I cannot see why they should shut their gates in our faces, a little band, when there is no foe anear them."

"Ralph," said Hugh, "thou must think of this once more, that the Dry Tree is no good let-pass to flourish in honest men's faces; specialiter if they be monks. Amongst the brothers of Higham the tale goes that those Champions have made covenant with the devil to come to their above whensoever they be not more than one to five. Nay, moreover, it is

said that there by very devils amongst them; some in the likeness of carles, and some (God help us) dressed up in women's flesh; and fair flesh also, meseemeth. Also to-day they say in Higham that no otherwise might they ever have overcome the stark and cruel carles of the Burg of the Four Friths and chased them out of their town, as we know they have done. Hah! what sayest thou?"

"I say, Hugh," quoth Ralph angrily, "that thou art a fool to go about with a budget of slanderous old wives' tales." Hugh laughed. "Be not so wroth, little lord, or I shall be asking thee tales of marvels also. But hearken. I shall smooth out thy frowns with a smile when thou hast heard this: this folk are not only afeard of their old enemies, the devil-led men, but also they fear those whom the devil-led men have driven out of house and home, to wit, the Burgers. Yet again they fear the Burgers yet more, because they have beaten some of the very foes of Higham, to wit, the Westland Barons; for they have taken from them some of their strongholds, and are deemed to be gathering force."

Ralph pondered a while, and then he said: "Brother, hast thou any tidings of Upmeads, or that these Burgers have gone down thither?" "God forbid!" said Hugh. "Nay, I have had no tidings of Upmeads since I was fool enough to leave it."

"What! brother," said Ralph, "thou hast not thriven then?"

"I have had ups and downs," said Hugh, "but the ups have been one rung of the ladder, and the downs three—or more. Three months I sat in prison for getting me a broken head in a quarrel that concerned me not. Six months was I besieged in a town whither naught led me but ill-luck. Two days I wore in running thence, having scaled the wall and swam the ditch in the night. Three months I served squire to a knight who gave me the business of watching his wife of whom he was jealous; and to help me out of the weariness of his house I must needs make love myself to the said wife, who sooth to say was perchance worth it. Thence again I went by night and cloud. Ten months I wore away at the edge of the wildwood, and sometimes in it, with a sort of fellows who taught me many things, but not how to keep my hands from

other men's goods when I was hungry. There was I taken with some five others by certain sergeants of Higham, whom the warriors of the town had sent out cautiously to see if they might catch a few men for their ranks. Well, they gave me the choice of the gallows-tree or service for the Church, and so, my choice made, there have I been ever since, till I saw thy face this evening, fair sir."

"Well, brother," said Ralph, "all that shall be amended, and thou shalt back to Upmeads with me. Yet wert thou to amend thyself somewhat, it might not be ill."

Quoth Hugh: "It shall be tried, brother. But may I ask thee somewhat?" Said Ralph: "Ask on." "Fair Sir," said Hugh, "thou seemedst grown into a pretty man when I saw thee e'en-now before this twilight made us all alike; but the men at thy back are not wont to be led by men who have not earned a warrior's name, yet they follow thee: how cometh that about? Again, before the twilight gathered I saw the woman that rideth anigh us (who is now but a shadow) how fair and gentle she is: indeed there is no marvel in her following thee (though if she be an earl's daughter she is a fair getting for an imp of Upmeads), for thou art a well shapen lad, little lord, and carriest a sweet tongue in thy mouth. But tell me, what is she?"

"Brother," said Ralph kindly, "she is my wife."

"I kiss her hands," said Hugh; "but of what lineage is she?"

"She is my wife," said Ralph. Said Hugh: "That is, forsooth, a high dignity." Said Ralph: "Thou sayest sooth, though in mockery thou speakest, which is scarce kind to thine own mother's son: but learn, brother, that I am become a Friend of the Well, and were meet to wed with the daughters of the best of the Kings: yet is this one meeter to wed with me than the highest of the Queens; for she also is a Friend of the Well. Moreover, thou sayest it that the champions of the Dry Tree, who would think but little of an earl for a leader, are eager to follow me: and if thou still doubt what this may mean, abide, till in two days or three thou see me before the foeman. Then shalt thou tell me how much

changed I am from the stripling whom thou knewest in Upmeads a little while ago."

Then was Hugh somewhat abashed, and he said: "I crave thy pardon, brother, but never had I a well filed tongue, and belike it hath grown no smoother amid the hard haps which have befallen me of late. Besides it was dull in there, and I must needs try to win a little mirth out of kith and kin."

"So be it, lad," quoth Ralph kindly, "thou didst ask and I told, and all is said."

"Yet forsooth," said Hugh, "thou hast given me marvel for marvel, brother." "Even so," said Ralph, "and hereafter I will tell thee more when we sit safe by the wine at Upmeads."

Now cometh back one of the fore-riders and draweth rein by Ralph and saith that they are hard on a little thorp under the hanging of the hill that was the beginning of the Down country on that road. So Ralph bade make stay there and rest the night over, and seek new tidings on the morrow; and the man told Ralph that the folk of the thorp were fleeing fast at the tidings of their company, and that it were best that he and some half score should ride sharply into the thorp, so that it might not be quite bare of victuals when they came to their night's lodging. Ralph bids him so do, but to heed well that he hurt no man, or let fire get into any house or roof; so he takes his knot of men and rides off on the spur, and Ralph and the main of them come on quietly; and when they came into the street of the thorp, lo there by the cross a big fire lighted, and the elders standing thereby cap in hand, and a score of stout carles with weapons in their hands. Then the chief man came up to Ralph and greeted him and said: "Lord, when we heard that an armed company was at hand we deemed no less than that the riders of the Burg were upon us, and deemed that there was nought for it but to flee each as far and as fast as he might. But now we have heard that thou art a good lord seeking his own with the help of worthy champions, and a foeman to those devils of the Burg, we bid thee look upon us and all we have as thine, lord, and take kindly such guesting as we may give thee."

The old man's voice quavered a little as he looked on the stark shapes of the Dry Tree; but Ralph looked kindly on

him, and said: "Yea, my master, we will but ask for a covering for our heads, and what victual thou mayst easily spare us in return for good silver, and thou shalt have our thanks withal. But who be these stout lads with staves and bucklers, or whither will they to-night?"

Thereat a tall young man with a spear in his hand and girt with a short sword came forth and said boldly: "Lord, we be a few who thought when we heard that the Burg-devils were at hand that we might as well die in the field giving stroke for stroke, as be hauled off and drop to pieces under the hands of their tormentors; and now thou hast come, we have little will to abide behind, but were fain to follow thee, and do thee what good we can: and after thou hast come to thine above, when we go back to our kin thou mayst give us a gift if it please thee: but we deem that no great matter if thou but give us leave to have the comfort of thee and thy Champions for a while in these hard days."

When he had done speaking there rose up from the Champions a hum as of praise, and Ralph was well-pleased withal, deeming it a good omen; so he said: "Fear not, good fellows, that I shall forget you when we have overcome the foemen, and meanwhile we will live and die together. But thou, ancient man, show our sergeants where our riders shall lie to-night, and what they shall do with their horses."

So the elders marshalled the little host to their abodes for that night, lodging the more part of them in a big barn on the western outskirt of the thorp. The elder who led them thither, brought them victual and good drink, and said to them: "Lords, ye were best to keep a good watch to-night because it is on this side that we may look for an onfall from the foemen if they be abroad to-night; and sooth to say that is one cause we have bestowed you here, deeming that ye would not grudge us the solace of knowing that your valiant bodies were betwixt us and them, for we be a poor unwalled people."

Stephen to whom he spake laughed at his word, and said: "Heart-up, carle! within these few days we shall build up a better wall than ye may have of stone and lime; and that is the overthrow of our foemen in the open field."

So there was kindness and good fellowship betwixt the thorp-dwellers and the riders, and the country folk told those others many tales of the evil deeds of the Burg-devils, as they called them; but they could not tell them for certain whether they had gone down into Upmeads.

As to Ralph and Ursula they, with Richard and Roger, were lodged in the headman's house, and had good feast there, and he also talked over the where-abouts of the Burgers with the thorp-dwellers, but might have no certain tidings. So he and Ursula and his fellows went to bed and slept peacefully for the first hours of the night.

CHAPTER 22

An Old Acquaintance Comes From the Down Country to See Ralph

But an hour after midnight Ralph arose, as his purpose was, and called Richard, and they took their swords and went forth and about the thorp and around its outskirts, and found naught worse than their own watch any where; so they came back again to their quarters and found Roger standing at the door, who said to Ralph: "Lord, here is a man who would see thee." "What like is he?" said Ralph. Said Roger, "He is an old man, but a tough one; however, I have got his weapons from him." "Bring him in," said Ralph, "and he shall have his say."

So they all went into the chamber together and there was light therein; but the man said to Ralph: "Art thou the Captain of the men-at-arms, lord?" "Yea," said Ralph. Said the man, "I were as lief have these others away." "So be it," said Ralph; "depart for a little while, friends." So they went, but Ursula lay in the bed, which was in a nook in the wall; the man looked about the chamber and said: "Is there any one in the bed?" "Yea," said Ralph, "my wife, good fellow; shall

she go also?" "Nay," said the carle, "we shall do as we are now. So I will begin my tale."

Ralph looked on him and deemed he had seen him before, but could not altogether call his visage to mind; so he held his peace and the man went on.

"I am of the folk of the shepherds of the Downs: we be not a many by count of noses, but each one of us who is come to man's years, and many who be past them, as I myself, can handle weapons at a pinch. Now some deal we have been harried and have suffered by these wretches who have eaten into the bowels of this land; that is to say, they have lifted our sheep, and slain some of us who withstood them: but whereas our houses be uncostly and that we move about easily from one hill-side to another, it is like that we should have deemed it wisest to have borne this trouble, like others of wind and weather, without seeking new remedy, but that there have been tokens on earth and in the heavens, whereof it is too long to tell thee, lord, at present, which have stirred up our scattered folk to meet together in arms. Moreover, the blood of our young men is up, because the Burg-devils have taken some of our women, and have mishandled them grievously and shamefully, so that naught will keep point and edge from seeking the war-clash. Futhermore, there is an old tale which hath now come up again, That some time when our folk shall be in great need, there shall come to our helping one from afar, whose home is anigh; a stripling and a great man; a runaway, and the conqueror of many: then, say they, shall the point and the edge bring the red water down on the dear dales; whereby we understand that the blood of men shall be shed there, and naught to our shame or dishonour. Again I mind me of a rhyme concerning this which sayeth:

The Dry Tree shall be seen
On the green earth, and green
The Well-spring shall arise
For the hope of the wise.
They are one which were twain,
The Tree bloometh again,

And the Well-spring hath come
From the waste to the home.

Well, lord, thou shalt tell me presently if this hath aught to do with thee: for indeed I saw the Dry Tree, which hath scared us so many a time, beaten on thy sergeants' coats; but now I will go on and make an end of my story."

Ralph nodded to him kindly, for now he remembered the carle, though he had seen him but that once when he rode the Greenway across the downs to Higham. The old man looked up at him as if he too had an inkling of old acquaintance with Ralph, but went on presently:

"There is a woman who dwells alone with none to help her, anigh to Saint Ann's Chapel; a woman not very old; for she is of mine own age, and time was we have had many a fair play in the ingles of the downs in the July weather—not very old, I say, but wondrous wise, as I know better than most men; for oft, even when she was young, would she foretell things to come to me, and ever it fell out according to her spaedom. To the said woman I sought to-day in the morning, not to win any wisdom of her, but to talk over remembrances of old days; but when I came into her house, lo, there was my carline walking up and down the floor, and she turned round upon me like the young woman of past days, and stamped her foot and cried out: 'What does the sluggard dallying about women's chambers when the time is come for the deliverance?'

"I let her talk, and spake no word lest I should spoil her story, and she went on:

" 'Take thy staff, lad, for thou art stout as well as merry, and go adown to the thorps at the feet of the downs toward Higham; keep thee well from the Burg-devils, and go from stead to stead till thou comest on a captain of men-at-arms who is lord over a company of green-coats, green-coats of the Dry Tree—a young lord, fair-faced, and kind-faced, and mighty, and not to be conquered, and the blessing of the folk and the leader of the Shepherds, and the foe of their foeman and the well-beloved of Bear-father. Go night and day, sit not down to eat, stand not to drink; heed none that crieth

after thee for deliverance, but go, go, go till thou hast found him. Meseems I see him riding toward Higham, but those dastards will not open gate to him, of that be sure. He shall pass on and lie to-night, it may be at Mileham, it may be at Milton, it may be at Garton; at one of those thorps shall ye find him. And when ye have found him thus bespeak him: O bright Friend of the Well, turn not aside to fall on the Burgers in this land, either at Foxworth Castle, or the Longford, or the Nineways Garth: all that thou mayest do hereafter, thou or thy champions. There be Burgers otherwhere, housed in no strong castle, but wending the road toward the fair greensward of Upmeads. If thou delay to go look on them, then shall thy work be to begin again amid sorrow of heart and loss that may not be remedied.' Hast thou heard me, lord?"

"Yea, verily," said Ralph, "and at sunrise shall we be in the saddle to ride straight to Upmeads. For I know thee, friend."

"Hold a while," said the carle, "for meseemeth I know thee also. But this withal she said: 'But hearken, Giles, hearken a while, for I see him clearly, and the men that he rideth with, and the men that are following to his aid, fierce and fell are they; but so withal are the foemen that await them, and his are few, howsoever fierce. Therefore bid him this also. Haste, haste, haste! But haste not overmuch, lest thou speed the worse: in Bear Castle I see a mote of our folk, and thee amidst of it with thy champions, and I see the staves of the Shepherds rising round thee like a wood. In Wulstead I see a valiant man with sword by side and sallet on head, and with him sitteth a tall man-at-arms grizzle-headed and red-bearded, big-boned and mighty; they sit at the wine in a fair chamber, and a well-looking dame serveth them; and there are weaponed men no few about the streets. Wilt thou pass by friends, and old friends? Now ride on, Green Coats! stride forth, Shepherds! staves on your shoulders, Wool-wards! and there goes the host over the hills into Upmeads, and the Burg-devils will have come from the Wood Debateable to find graves by the fair river. And then do thy will, O Friend of the Well.' "

The carle took a breath, and then he said: "Lord, this is the say I was charged with, and if thou understandest it, well; but if it be dark to thee, I may make it clear if thou ask me aught."

Ralph pondered a while, and then he said: "Is it known of others than thy spaewife that the Burgers be in Upmeads?" "Nay, lord," said the carle, "and this also I say to thee, that I deem what she said that they be not in Upmeads yet, and but drawing thitherward, as I deem from the Wood Debateable."

Ralph arose from his seat and strode up and down the chamber a while; then he went to bed, and stood over Ursula, who lay twixt sleeping and waking, for she was weary; then he came back to the carle, and said to him: "Good friend, I thank thee, and this is what I shall do: when daylight is broad (and lo, the dawn beginning!) I shall gather my men, and ride the shortest way, which thou shalt show me, to Bear Castle, and there I shall give the token of the four fires which erewhile a good man of the Shepherds bade me if I were in need. And it seems to me that there shall the mote be hallowed, though it may be not before nightfall. But the mote done, we shall wend, the whole host of us, be we few or many, down to Wulstead, where we shall fall in with my friend Clement Chapman, and hear tidings. Thence shall we wend the dear ways I know into the land where I was born and the folk amongst whom I shall die. And so let St. Nicholas and All Hallows do as they will with us. Deemest thou, friend, that this is the meaning of thy wise shefriend?"

The carle's eyes glittered, and he rose up and stood close by Ralph, and said: "Even so she meant; and now I seem to see that but few of thy riders shall be lacking when they turn their heads away from Upmeads towards the strongplaces of the Burg-devils that are hereabouts. But tell me, Captain of the host, is that victual and bread that I see on the board?"

Ralph laughed: "Fall to, friend, and eat thy fill; and here is wine withal. Thou needest not to fear it. Wert thou any the worse of the wine that Thirly poured into thee that other day?"

"Nay, nay, master," said the carle between his mouthfuls, "but mickle the better, as I shall be after this: all luck to thee! Yet see I that I need not wish thee luck, since that is thine already. Sooth to say, I deemed I knew thee when I first set eyes on thee again. I looked not to see thee more; though I spoke to thee words at that time which came from my heart, almost without my will. Though it is but a little while ago, thou hast changed much since then, and hast got another sort of look in the eyes than then they had. Nay, nay," said he laughing, "not when thou lookest on me so frankly and kindly; that is like thy look when we passed Thirly about. Yea, I see the fashion of it: one look is for thy friends, another for thy foes. God be praised for both. And now I am full, I will go look on thy wife."

So he went up to the bed and stood over Ursula, while she, who was not fully awake, smiled up into his face. The old man smiled back at her and bent down and kissed her mouth, and said: "I ask thy pardon, lady, and thine, my lord, if I be too free, but such is our custom of the Downs; and sooth to say thy face is one that even a old man should not fail to kiss if occasion serve, so that he may go to paradise with the taste thereof on his lips."

"We are nowise hurt by thy love, friend," said Ursula; "God make thy latter days of life sweet to thee!"

CHAPTER 23

They Ride to Bear Castle

But while they spake thus and were merry, the dawn had wellnigh passed into daylight. Then Ralph bade old Giles sleep for an hour, and went forth and called Roger and Richard and went to the great barn. There he bade the watch wake up Stephen and all men, and they gat to horse as

speedily as they might, and were on the road ere the sun was fully up. The spearmen of the thorp did not fail them, and numbered twenty and three all told. Giles had a horse given him and rode the way by Ralph.

They rode up and down the hills and dales, but went across country and not by the Greenway, for thuswise the road was shorter.

But when they had gone some two leagues, and were nigh on top of a certain low green ridge, they deemed that they heard men's voices anigh and the clash of arms; and it must be said that by Ralph's rede they journeyed somewhat silently. So Ralph, who was riding first with Giles, bid all stay and let the crown of the ridge cover them. So did they, and Giles gat off his horse and crept on to the top of the ridge till he could see down to the dale below. Presently he came down again the old face of him puckered with mirth, and said softly to Ralph: "Did I not say thou wert lucky? here is the first fruits thereof. Ride over the ridge, lord, at once, and ye shall have what there is of them as safe as a sheep in a penfold."

So Ralph drew sword and beckoned his men up, and they all handled their weapons and rode over the brow, and tarried not one moment there, not even to cry their cries; for down in the bottom were a sort of men, two score and six (as they counted them afterward) sitting or lying about a cooking fire, or loitering here and there, with their horses standing behind them, and they mostly unhelmed. The Champions knew them at once for men of their old foes, and there was scarce time for a word ere the full half of them had passed by the sword of the Dry Tree; then Ralph cried out to spare the rest, unless they offered to run; so the foemen cast down their weapons and stood still, and were presently brought before Ralph, who sat on the grass amidst of the ring of the Champions. He looked on them a while and remembered the favour of those whom he had seen erewhile in the Burg; but ere he could speak Giles said softly in his ear: "These be of the Burg, forsooth, as ye may see by their dogs' faces; but they be not clad nor armed as those whom we have met heretofore. Ask them whence they be, lord."

Ralph spake and said: "Whence and whither are ye, ye manslayers?" But no man of them answered. Then said Ralph: "Pass these murderers by the edge of the sword, Stephen; unless some one of them will save his life and the life of his fellows by speaking."

As he spake, one of the youngest of the men hung down his head a little, and then raised it up: "Wilt thou spare our lives if I speak?" "Yea," said Ralph. "Wilt thou swear it by the edge of the blade?" said the man. Ralph drew forth his sword and said: "Lo then! I swear it." The man nodded his head, and said: "Few words are best; and whereas I wot not if my words will avail thee aught, and since they will save our lives, I will tell thee truly. We are men of the Burg whom these green-coated thieves drave out of the Burg on an unlucky day. Well, some of us, of whom I was one, fetched a compass and crossed the water that runneth through Upmeads by the Red Bridge, and so gat us into the Wood Debateable through the Uplands. There we struck a bargain with the main band of strong-thieves of the wood, that we and they together would get us a new home in Upmeads, which is a fat and pleasant land. So we got us ready; but the Woodmen told us that the Upmeads carles, though they be not many, are strong and dauntless, and since we now had pleasant life before us, with good thralls to work for us, and with plenty of fair women for our bed-mates, we deemed it best to have the most numbers we might, so that we might over-whelm the said carles at one blow, and get as few of ourselves slain as might be. Now we knew that another band of us had entered the lands of the Abbot of Higham, and had taken hold of some of his castles; wherefore the captains considered and thought, and sent us to give bidding to our folk south here to march at once toward us in Upmeads, that our bands might meet there, and scatter all before us. There is our story, lord."

Ralph knitted his brow, and said: "Tell me (and thy life lieth on thy giving true answers), do thy folk in these strongholds know of your purpose of falling upon Upmeads?" "Nay," said the Burger. Said Ralph: "And will they know otherwise if ye do them not to wit?" "Nay," again

said the man. Said Ralph: "Are thy folk already in Upmeads?" "Nay," said the captive, "but by this time they will be on the road thither." "How many all told?" said Ralph. The man reddened and stammered: "A thousand—two—two thousand—A thousand, lord," said he. "Get thy sword ready, Stephen," said Ralph. "How many, on thy life, Burger?" "Two thousand, lord," said the man. "And how many do ye look to have from Higham-land?" Said the Burger, "Somewhat more than a thousand." Withal he looked uneasily at his fellows, some of whom were scowling on him felly. "Tell me now," said Ralph, "where be the other bands of the Burgers?"

Ere the captive could speak, he who stood next him snatched an unsheathed knife from the girdle of one of the Dry Tree, and quick as lightning thrust it into his fellow's belly, so that he fell dead at once amongst them. Then Stephen, who had his sword naked in his hand, straightway hewed down the slayer, and swords came out of the scabbards everywhere; and it went but a little but that all the Burgers were slain at once. But Ralph cried out: "Put up your swords, Champions! Stephen slew yonder man for slaying his fellow, who was under my ward, and that was but his due. But I have given life to these others, and so it must be held to. Tie their hands behind them and let us on to Bear Castle. For this tide brooks no delay."

So they gat to horse, and the footmen from Garton mounted the horses of the slain Burgers, and had the charge of guarding the twenty that were left. So they rode off all of them toward Bear Castle, and shortly to say it, came within sight of its rampart two hours before noon. Sooner had they came thither; but divers times they caught up with small companies of weaponed men, whose heads were turned the same way; and Giles told Ralph each time that they were of the Shepherd-folk going to the mote. But now when they were come so nigh to the castle they saw a very stream of men setting that way, and winding up the hill to the rampart. And Giles said: "It is not to be doubted but that Martha hath sent round the war-brand, and thou wilt presently have an host that will meet thy foemen without delay; and what

there lacks in number shall be made good by thy luck, which once again was shown by our falling in with that company e'en now."

"Yea truly," said Ralph, "but wilt thou now tell me how I shall guide myself amongst thy folk, and if they will grant me the aid I ask?"

"Look, look," said Giles, "already some one hath made clear thine asking to our folk; and hearken! up there they are naming the ancient Father of our Race, without whom we may do nought, even with the blessed saints to aid. There then is thine answer, lord."

Indeed as he spoke came down on the wind the voice of a chant, sung by many folk, the words whereof he well remembered: SMITE ASIDE THE AXE, O BEAR-FATHER. And therewith rose up into the air a column of smoke intermingled with fire from each of the four corners of that stronghold of the Ancient Folk. Ralph rejoiced when he saw it, and the heart rose within him and fluttered in his bosom, and Ursula, who rode close behind him, looked up into his face well pleased and happy.

Thus rode they up the bent and over the turf bridge into the plain of the garth, and whatso of people were there flocked about to behold the new-come warriors; sooth to say, there were but some two hundreds, who looked but few indeed in the great square place, but more were streaming in every minute. Giles led him and his men into the north-east corner of the castle, and there they gat off their horses and lay down on the grass awaiting what should betide.

CHAPTER 24

The Folkmote of the Shepherds

In about an hour all the folk within the castle began to set toward the ingle wherein lay Ralph and his fellows, and then all rose up, while the folk of the Shepherds took their places on the slopes of the earth walls, but on the top hard by the fire, which was still burning, stood up an old hoar man with a beard exceeding long; he had a sallet on his head, and held a guisarme in his hand. All men held their peace when they saw him standing there; and straightway he proclaimed the hallowing of the Mote in such form of words as was due amongst that folk, and which were somewhat long to tell here. Then was silence again for a little, and then the old man spake: "Few words are best to-day, neighbours; for wherefore are we met together?" There arose a hum of assent from the Shepherds as he spoke and men clashed their weapons together; but none said any clear word. Then spake the old man: "We be met together because we have trouble on hand, and because there is a helper to hand, of whom the words of the wise and tales of old have told us; and because as he shall help us, so shall we help him, since indeed our trouble is his also: now, neighbours, shall I say the word for you which ye would say to this young man, who is nevertheless old in wisdom, and true-hearted and kind?"

Then came the hum of yeasay again the the clashing of weapons, and the old man spake again: "Ralph of Upmeads, there thou standest, wilt thou help us against the tyrants, as we shall help thee?"

"Yea," said Ralph. Said the Elder: "Wilt thou be our Captain, if we do according to thy bidding? For thou needest not fear our failing thee."

"Yea verily," said Ralph.

Said the Elder: "Ralph of Upmeads, wilt thou be our Captain as an alien and a hireling, or as a brother?"

"As a brother," quoth Ralph.

"Come up here then, Captain of our folk, and take my hand in thine, and swear by our fathers and thine to be a true brother of us, and take this ancient staff of war in thine hand. And, ye kindred of the Shepherds, bear witness of his swearing. Yea and ye also, O neighbours of the Dry Tree!"

So Ralph went up on the wall-top and took the Elder's hand, and took from him the ancient guisarme, which was inlaid with gold letters of old time; and he swore in a loud voice to be a true brother of the Shepherd-folk, and raised the weapon aloft and shook it strongly, and all the Folk cried, "Hail our brother!" and the Champions shouted gladly withal, and great joy there was in that ingle of the ancient work.

Then spake the Elder and said: "Ye champions of the Dry Tree, will ye wend with us under the Captain our brother against his foemen and ours?"

Then stood forth Stephen a-Hurst and said, "Master shepherd, for nought else are we come hither."

Said the Elder: "Will ye come with us as friends or as hirelings? for in any case we would have you by our sides, and not in face of us; and though we be shepherds, and unhoused, or ill-housed, yet have we wherewithal to wage you, as ye know well enough, who have whiles lifted our gear."

Then Stephen laughed and said: "True it is that we have whiles driven prey in your country, yea, and had some hard knocks therein; but all that was in playing the game of war, and now since we are to fight side by side, we will be paid by our foes and not by our friends; so neither hair nor wool will we have of yours, whatever we may have of the Burgers; and it is like that we shall be good friends of yours hence-forward."

Once more all they that were there shouted. But once more the Elder spoke and said: "Is any man now wishful to speak?" None answered till a big and burly man rose up and

said: "Nay, Tall Thomas, thou hast said and done all that need was, and I deem that time presses; wherefore my mind is that we now break up this mote, and that after we have eaten a morsel we get ourselves into due array and take to the road. Now let any man speak against this if he will."

None gainsaid him; nay, all seemed well-pleased. So the Elder proclaimed the breaking up of the mote, and they went from out the hallowed place and sat down in the dyke on the outside of the rampart and behind the country which stretched out all lovely and blue before them, for the day was bright and fair. There then certain women brought victual and drink to them, and served the strangers first.

So when they had eaten and drunk, Ralph bade the Shepherds array them duly, and appointed them leaders of tens and hundreds with the help of Giles, who was now clad in a hauberk and mail-coif and looked a proper man-at-arms. Then they told over their company, and numbered of the Dry Tree one hundred and fifty champions, outtaken Stephen and Roger; of the men of Garton were twenty and two, and of the Shepherds three hundred and seventy and seven stout carles, some eighty of whom had bows, and the rest glaives and spears and other staff-weapons. There was not much armour of defence amongst them, but they were one and all stark carles and doughty.

So when they were told over and made five hundred and fifty and four, they gat them into array for the road; and Ralph went afoot with no armour but his sallet, and a light coat of fence which he had gotten him in the Burg. He would have had Ursula ride on her palfrey with the Sage, but she would not, and held it for mirth and pleasure that she should go afoot through the land, now she was so nigh come home to her lord's house; so she went forth by Ralph's side with her broidered gown trussed through her girdle so that the trimness of her feet drew the eyes of all men to them. As for Richard, he took a half score of the champions, and they rode on ahead to see that all was clear before the main host; which he might well do, as he knew the country so well.

CHAPTER 25
They Come to Wulstead

Thus went they, and nought befell them to tell of till they came anigh the gates of Wulstead hard on sunset. The gates, it has been said; for whereas Ralph left Wulstead a town unwalled, he now found it fenced with pales, and with two towers strongly framed of timber, one on either side the gate, and on the battlements of the said towers they saw spears glittering; before the gate they saw a barrier of big beams also, and the gleaming of armour therein. Ralph was glad when he saw that they meant some defence; for though Wulstead was not in the lands of Upmeads, yet it was always a friendly neighbour, and he looked to eke out his host therein.

Wulstead standeth on a little hill or swelling of the earth, and the road that the company of Ralph took went up to the gate across the plain meadows, which had but here and there a tree upon them, so that the going of the company was beheld clearly from the gate; as was well seen, because anon came the sound of the blowing of great horns, and the spears thickened in the towers. Then Ralph stayed his company two bowshots from the barriers, while he himself, with his sword in his sheath, took Ursula's hand and set forth an easy pace toward the gate. Some of his company, and specially Roger and Stephen, would have letted him; but he laughed and said, "Why, lads, why? these be friends." "Yea," quoth Roger, "but an arrow knoweth no kindred nor well-willers: have a care, lord." Said the Sage of Swevenham: "Ye speak but after the folly of men of war; the hands and the eyes that be behind the bows have other hands and eyes behind them which shall not suffer that a Friend of the Well shall be hurt."

So Ralph and Ursula went forth, and came within a stone's cast of the barrier, when Ralph lifted up his voice and said: "Is there a captain of the townsfolk within the timber there?" A cheery voice answered him: "Yea, yea, lad; spare thy breath; I am coming to thee."

And therewith a man came from out the barrier and did off his headpiece and ran straight toward Ralph, who saw at once that it was Clement Chapman; he made no more ado, but coming up to Ralph fell to clipping him in his arms, while the tears ran down his face. Then he stood aloof and gazed upon him speechless a little while, and then spake: "Hail, and a hundred times hail! but now I look on thee I see what hath betid, and that thou art too noble and high that I should have cast mine arms about thee. But now as for this one, I will be better mannered with her."

Therewith he knelt down before Ursula, and kissed her feet, but reverently. And she stopped down and raised him up, with a merry countenance kissed his face, and stroked his cheeks with her hand and said: "Hail, friend of my lord! Was it not rather thou than he who delivered me from the pain and shame of Utterbol, whereas thou didst bring him safe through the mountains unto Goldburg? And but for that there had been no Well, either for him or for me."

But Clement stood with his head hanging down, and his face reddening. Till Ralph said to him: "Hail, friend! many a time we thought of this meeting when we were far away and hard bestead; but this is better than all we thought of. But now, Clement, hold up thine head and be a stout man of war, for thou seest that we are not alone."

Said Clement: "Yea, fair lord, and timely ye come, both thou and thy company; and now that I have my speech again which joy hath taken away from me at the first, I shall tell thee this, that if ye go further than the good town ye shall be met and fought withal by men who are over-many and over-fierce for us." "Yea," said Ralph, "and how many be they?" Quoth Clement: "How many men may be amongst them I wot not, but I deem there be some two thousand devils."

Now Ralph reddened, and he took Clement by the shoul-

der, and said: "Tell me, Clement, are they yet in Upmeads?" "Sooth to say," said Clement, "by this while they may be therein; but this morn it was yet free of them; but when thou art home in our house, thy gossip shall belike tell thee much more than I can; for she is foreseeing, and hath told us much in this matter also that hath come to pass." Then spake Ralph: "Where are my father and my mother; and shall I go after them at once without resting, through the dark night and all?"

Said Clement, and therewith his face brightened: "Nay, thou needest go no further to look for them than the House of Black Canons within our walls: there are they dwelling in all honour and dignity these two days past." "What!" said Ralph, "have they fled from Upmeads, and left the High House empty? I pray thee, Clement, bring me to them as speedily as may be."

"Verily," said Clement, "they have fled, with many another, women and children and old men, who should but hinder the carles who have abided behind. Nicholas Longshanks is the leader of them down there, and the High House is their stronghold in a way; though forsooth their stout heads and strong hands are better defence."

Here Ralph brake in: "Sweetling Ursula, though thy feet have worn a many miles to-day, I bid thee hasten back to the company and tell Richard that it is as I said, to wit, that friends, and good guesting await them; so let them hasten hither and come within gates at once. For as for me, I have sworn it that I will not go one step back till I have seen my father and mother in their house of Upmeads. Is it well said, Clement?" "Yea, forsooth," said Clement; but he could not take his eyes off Ursula's loveliness, as she kilted her skirts and ran her ways like one of Diana's ladies in the wildwood. At last he said, "Thou shalt wot, fair sir, that ye will have a little band to go with thee from us of Wulstead; forsooth we had gone to-morrow morn in any case, but since thou art here, all is well." Even as he spake a great shout broke out from the company as Ursula had given her message, and then came the tramp of men and horses and the clash of weapons as they set forward; and Clement looked and beheld how first of all the

array came Ursula, bearing the hallowed staff in her hand; for her heart also was set on what was to come. Then cried out Clement: "Happy art thou, lord, and happy shalt thou be, and who shall withstand thee? Lo! what a war-duke it is! and what a leader that marches with fate in her hands before thine host!"

Therewith were they all joined together, and Ursula gave the guisarme into Ralph's hand, and with his other hand he took hers, and the bar of the barrier was lifted and the gates thrown open, and they all streamed into the street, the champions coming last and towering over the footmen as they sat, big men on their big horses, as if they were very bodyguards of the God of War.

CHAPTER 26

Ralph Sees His Father and Mother Again

Thus came they into the market-place of Wulstead nigh to Clement's house, and there the company stood in ordered ranks. Ralph looked round about half expecting to see his gossip standing in the door; but Clement smiled and said: "Thou art looking round for thy gossip, fair sir; but she is upon the north gate in war-gear; for we be too few in Wulstead to spare so clean-limbed and strong-armed a dame from our muster; but she shall be here against thou comest back from the Austin Canons, wither forsooth thou mayst go at once if thou wilt let me be master in the matter of lodging." Said Ralph, smiling: "Well, King of Wulstead, since thou givest leave I will e'en take it, nor needest thou give me any guide to the House of St. Austin, for I know it well. Sweetheart," said he, turning to Ursula, "what sayest thou: wilt thou come with me, or abide till to-morrow, when I shall show thee to my kinsmen?" "Nay," she said, "I will with

thee at once, my lord, if thou wilt be kind and take me; for meseemeth I also have a word to say to thy father, and the mother that bore thee."

"And thou, Hugh," said Ralph, "what sayest thou?" "Why, brother," said Hugh, "I think my blessing will abide the morrow's morn, for I have nought so fair and dear to show our father and mother as thou hast. Also to-morrow thou wilt have more to do; since thou art a captain, and I but a single varlet." And he smiled a little sourly on Ralph; who heeded it little, but took Ursula's hand and went his way with her.

It was but a few minutes for them to come to the House of the Canons, which was well walled toward the fields at the west of the town, so that it was its chief defence of that side. It was a fair house with a church but just finished, and Ralph could see down the street its new white pinnacles and the cross on its eastern gable rising over the ridge of the dortoir. They came to the gate, and round about it were standing men-at-arms not a few, who seemed doughty enough at first sight; but when Ralph looked on them he knew some of them, that they were old men, and somewhat past warlike deeds, for in sooth they were carles of Upmeads. Him they knew not, for he had somewhat cast down the visor of his helm; but they looked eagerly on the fair lady and the goodly knight.

So Ralph spake to the porter and bade him show him where was King Peter of Upmeads and his Lady wife; and the porter made him obeisance and told him that they were in the church, wherein was service toward; and bade him enter. So they went in and entered the church, and it was somewhat dim, because the sun was set, and there were many pictures, and knots of flowers in the glass of the windows.

So they went halfway down the nave, and stood together there; and the whole church was full of the music that the minstrels were making in the rood-loft, and most heavenly sweet it was; and as Ralph stood there his heart heaved with hope and love and the sweetness of his youth; and he looked at Ursula, and she hung her head, and he saw that her

shoulders were shaken with sobs; but he knew that it was with her as with him, so he spake no word to her.

Now when his eyes cleared and he was used to the twilight of the church, he looked toward the choir, and saw near to the Jesus altar a man and a woman standing together even as they were standing, and they were somewhat stricken in years. So presently he knew that this would be his father and mother; so he stood still and waited till the service should be over; and by then it was done the twilight was growing fast in the church, and the sacristan was lighting a lamp here and there in some of the chapels, and the aisles of the choir.

So King Peter and his wife turned and came slowly down the nave, and when they were come anigh, Ralph spake aloud, and said: "Hail, King Peter of Upmeads!" And the old man stopped and said unto him: "Yea, forsooth, my name is Peter, and my business is to be a king, or a kinglet rather; and once it seemed no such hard craft; but now it all goes otherwise, and belike my craft has left me; even as it fares with a leech when folk are either too well or too ill to need his leech-craft."

Then he looked at Ralph and at Ursula, and said: "Either my eyes are worse than I deemed yesterday, or thou art young, and a gallant knight, and she that is standing by thee is young, and fair. Ah, lad! time was when I would have bid thee come home, thou and thy sweetling, to my house with me, and abide there in ease and feastfully; but now the best rede I can give thee is to get thee gone from the land, for there is all unpeace in it. And yet, forsooth, friend, I know not where to send thee to seek for peace, since Upmeads hath failed us."

While he spoke, and Ralph was sore moved by the sound of his voice, and his speech wherein kindness and mocking was so blended, the Dame of Upmeads came to Ralph and laid her hand on his arm, and said in a pleasant voice, for she was soft-hearted and soft-spoken both: "Will not the fair young warrior and his mate do so much for an old man and his wife, who have heard not tidings of their best beloved son for two years well nigh, as to come with them to their

chamber, and answer a little question or two as to the parts of the world they have seen of late?"

Ralph nodded yeasay and began to move toward the porch, the Dame of Upmeads sticking close to him all the time, and King Peter following after and saying: "Yea, young man, thou mayst think the worse of me for hanging about here amongst the monks, when e'en now, for all I know, the battle is pitched in Upmeads; but Nicholas and all of them would have it so—Yea, and all my sons are away, fair sir; though of the eldest, who meseems was born with a long head, we hear that he is thriving, and hath grown great."

As he spake they were come into the porch, and passed into the open air, where it was still light; then the Dame turned round on Ralph and caught him by the two arms and cried out and cast her arms about his neck; and when she could sunder herself a little from him, she said: "O Ralph, I deemed that I knew thy voice, but I durst not halse thee till I knew it was mine own flesh and blood, lest I should have died for grief to think it was thee when it was not. O son, how fair thou art! Now do off thy sallet that I may see thee, thy face and thy curly head."

So did he, smiling as one who loved her, and again she fell to kissing and clipping him. Then his father came up and thrust her aside gently and embraced him also, and said: "Tell me, son, what thou are become? Thou art grown much of a man since thou stolest thyself away from me. Is there aught behind this goodly raiment of thine? And this fair lady, hath she stolen thee away from thy foes to bring thee home to us?"

Ralph laughed and said: "No less than that, father; I will tell thee all presently; but this first, that I am the captain of a goodly company of men-at-arms; and"——"Ah, son, sweetheart," said his mother, "and thou wilt be going away from us again to seek more fame: and yet, as I look on thee thou seemest to have grown great enough already. I deem thou wilt not leave us."

"Mother, my dear," said Ralph, "to-morrow morn we shall go down to battle in Upmeads, and the day after I shall come hither again, and bring you back to the High House with all

honour and glory. But look, mother," and he took Ursula's hand, "here is a daughter and a darling that I have brought back to thee, for this is my wedded wife."

Then Ursula looked beseechingly at the Dame, who took her in her arms and clipped her and kissed her, and said, "Welcome, daughter; for I feel thy body that thou lovest me."

Then said King Peter; "Forsooth, son, she is a sweet and dainty creature. If there be a fairer than her, I wot not; but none so fair have mine eyes looked on. Tell me whose daughter she is, and of what lineage?" And therewith he took her hand and kissed her.

But Ursula said: "I am come of no earl or baron. I am a yeoman's daughter, and both my father and my mother are dead, and I have no nigh kin save one brother who loveth me not, and would heed it little if he never say my face again. Now I tell thee this: that if my lord biddeth me go from him, I will depart; but for the bidding of none else will I leave him."

King Peter laughed and said: "Never will I bid thee depart." Then he took her hand and said: "Sweetling, fair daughter, what is thy name?" "Ursula," she said. Said he: "Ursula, thy palms are harder than be the hands of the dainty dames of the cities, but there is no churls' blood in thee meseemeth. What is thy kindred of the yeoman?" She said: "We be come of the Geirings of old time: it may be that the spear is broken, and the banner torn; but we forget not our forefathers, though we labour afield, and the barons and the earls call us churls. It is told amongst us that that word is but another way of saying earl, and that it meaneth a man."

Then spoke Ralph: "Father and mother both, I may well thank thee and bless thee that your eyes look upon this half of me with kind eyes. And now I shall tell thee that for this woman, her heart is greater than a king's or a leader of folk. And meseemeth her palms have hardened with the labour of delivering me from many troubles."

Then the Dame of Upmeads put her arms about Ursula's

neck again, and bade her all welcome once more, with sweet words of darling and dear, and well-beloved daughter.

But King Peter said: "Son, thou hast not told me what thou are become; and true it is that thou hast the look of a great one."

Said Ralph: "Father and King, I have become the Lord of the Little Land of Abundance, the sworn brother of the Champions of the Dry Tree, the Lord of the Castle of the Scaur, the brother and Warduke of the Shepherds; and to-morrow shall I be the Conqueror of the robbers and the devils of the Burg. And this be not enough for me, hearken! I and my wife both, yea and she leading me, have drunk of the Well at the World's End, and have become Friends thereof."

And he looked at his father with looks of love, and his father drew nigh to him again, and embraced him once more, and stroked his cheeks and kissed him as if he had become a child again: "O son," said he, "whatsoever thou dost, that thou dost full well. And lo, one while when I look on thee thou art my dear and sweet child, as thou wert years agone, and I love thee dearly and finely; and another while thou art a great and mighty man, and I fear thee; so much greater thou seemest than we poor upland folk."

Then smiled Ralph for love and happiness, and he said: "Father, I am thy child in the house and at the board, and that is for thine helping. And I am thy champion and the fierce warrior afield, and that also is for thine helping. Be of good cheer; for thine house shall not wane, but wax." And all those four were full of joy and their hearts were raised aloft.

But as they spake thus came a lay-brother and bent the knee before King Peter and bade him and the Dame of Upmeads to supper in the name of the Prior, and the Captain and the Lady therewith; for indeed the rumour of the coming of an host for the helping of the countryside had gotten into that House, and the Prior and the brethern sorely desired to look upon the Captain, not knowing him for Ralph of Upmeads. So into the Hall they went together, and there the holy fathers made them great feast and joy; and King Peter might not refrain him, but told the Prior how this was

his son come back from far lands, with the goodly Lady he had won to wife therein; and the Prior and all the fathers made much of Ralph, and rejoiced in their hearts when they saw how goodly a man of war he had gotten to be. And the Prior would lead him on to tell him of the marvels he had seen in the far parts of the world; but Ralph said but little thereon, whereas his thought was set on the days that lay even before his feet; yet some deal he told him of the uncouth manners of the lands beyond Whitwall, and at last he said: "Father, when the battles be over here, and there is peace on our lands again, I will ask thee to give me guesting for a night, that I may tell thee all the tale of what hath befallen me since the last summer day when I rode through Wulstead; but now I ask leave of thee to depart, for I have many things to do this even, as behoveth a captain, before I sleep for an hour or two. And if it be thy will, I would leave the Lady my wife with my mother here at least till morrow morn."

So the Prior gave him leave, loth though he were, and Ralph kissed his father and mother, and they blessed him. But Ursula said to him softly: "It is my meaning to go with thee down into Upmeads to-morrow; for who knoweth what may befall thee." Then he smiled upon her and went his ways down the hall and out-a-gates, while all men looked on him and did him worship.

CHAPTER 27

Ralph Holds Converse With Katherine His Gossip

Ralph went straight from St. Austin's to Clement's house, and found much people about the door thereof, what of the townsmen, what of the men of his own host. He passed through these, and found Clement in his chamber, and with him a half score of such company as was without, and

amongst them Roger and the Sage; but Stephen and Richard both were amongst their men doing what was needful. All men arose when Ralph entered; but he looked around, and could see nought of his gossip amongst them. Then he sat down by Clement and asked if he had any fresh tidings; and Clement did him to wit that there had come in a carle from out of Upmeads, who had told them by sure tokens that the foe were come into the Upmeads-land at noon that day, and between then and sunset had skirmished with Nicholas and them that were holding the High House, but had gotten nought thereby. This man, said Clement, being both bold and of good sleight had mingled with the foe; and had heard the talk of them, and he said that they had no inkling of the Shepherds or the Dry Tree coming against them; but they looked to have aid from their own folk from the lands of Higham; wherefore they made a mock of the defence of the Upmeads' men; and said that since, when they were all joined together in Upmeads, they might enter where they would without the loss of a half-score men, therefore they would risk nought now; nor would they burn either the High House or the other steadings, since, said they, they were minded to keep them sound and whole for their own.

These tidings seemed good to Ralph; so he took a cup of wine and pledged the company, and said: "My masters, such of you as list to sleep long to-night had best be abed presently, for I warn you that the trumpets will blow for departure before the sun riseth to-morrow; and he that faileth to see to-morrow's battle will be sorry for his lack all his life long."

When he had thus spoken they all cried hail to him, and anon arose and went their ways. Then Ralph bade Clement come with him that he might visit the quarters of his men-at-arms, and see that all the leaders knew of the muster, and of the order of departing on the morrow; and Clement arose and went with him.

As they were on the way Ralph asked Clement what ailed his gossip Katherine that she had not come to meet him already; and Clement laughed and said: "Nought, nought; she is somewhat shamefaced to meet thee first amongst a many folk, and she not able belike to refrain her kisses and

caresses to thee. Fear not, she is in her bower-aloft, and we shall find her there when we come back from our errand; fear not! she will not sleep till she hath had her arms about thee." "Good is that," said Ralph; "I had looked to see her ere now; but when we meet apart from folk, something we shall be able to say to each other, which belike neither she nor I had liked to leave unsaid till we meet again."

So came they to the chief quarters of the fighting men, and Ralph had all the leaders called to him, and he spake to them of how they should do on the morrow, both footmen and horsemen, whatwise they should stand together, and how they should fall on; and he told them all as clearly as if he were already in the field with the foe before him; so that they wondered at him, so young in years, being so old in the wisdom of war. Withal they saw of him that he had no doubt but that they should come to their above on the morrow; and all men, not only of the tried men-at-arms of the Dry Tree, but they of the Shepherds also, even those of them who had never stricken a stroke in anger, were of high heart and feared not what should befall.

So when all this business was over, they turned about and came their ways home to Clement's house again.

They saw lights in the chamber or ever they entered, and when they came to the door, lo! there within was Katherine walking up and down the floor as if she knew not how to contain herself. She turned and saw Ralph at the door, and she cried aloud and ran towards him with arms outspread. But when she drew nigh to him and beheld him closely, she withheld her, and falling down on her knees before him took his hand and fell to kissing it and weeping and crying out, "O my lord, my lord, thou art come again to us!" But Ralph stooped down to her, and lifted her up, and embraced her, and kissed her on the cheeks and the mouth, and led her to the settle and sat down beside her and put his arm about her; and Clement looked on smiling, and sat him down over against them.

Then spake Katherine: "O my lord! how great and masterful hast thou grown; never did I hope to see thee come back so mighty a man." And again she wept for joy; but Ralph

kissed her again, and she said, laughing through her tears: "Master Clement, this lord and warrior hath brought back with him something that I have not seen; and belike he hath had one fair woman in his arms, or more it may be, since I saw him last. For though he but kisses me as his gossip and foster-mother, yet are his kisses closer and kinder than they were aforetime."

Said Clement: "Sooth is the Sage's guess; yet verily, fair sir, I have told her somewhat of thy journeys, so far as I knew of them."

Said Katherine: "Dear lord and gossip, wilt thou not tell me more thereof now?"

"What!" said Ralph; "shall I not sleep to-night?"

"Dear gossip," she said, "thou art over-mighty to need sleep. And ah! I had forgotten in the joy of our meeting that to-morrow thou goest to battle; and how if thou come not again?"

"Fear nought," said Ralph; "art thou not somewhat foreseeing? Dost thou not know that to-morrow or the day after I shall come back unhurt and victorious; and then shall both thou and Clement come to Upmeads and abide there as long as ye will; and then shall I tell thee a many tales of my wanderings; and Ursula my beloved, she also shall tell thee."

Katherine reddened somewhat, but she said: "Would I might kiss her feet, dear lord. But now, I pray thee, tell me somewhat, now at once."

"So shall it be," said Ralph, "since thou wilt have it, dear gossip; but when I have done I shall ask thee to tell me somewhat, whereof hath long been wonder in my mind; and meseemeth that by the time we are both done with tales, I shall needs be putting on my helm again.—Nay, again I tell thee it is but a show of battle that I go to!"

So then he went and sat by Clement's side, and began and told over as shortly as might be the tidings of his journeys. And oft she wept for pity thereat.

But when he was done and he had sat beholding her, and saw how goodly a woman she was, and how straight and well knit of body, he said: "Gossip, I wonder now, if thou also hast drunk of the Well; for thou art too fair and goodly to be

of the age that we call thee. How is this? Also tell me how thou camest by this pair of beads that seem to have led me to the Well at the World's End? For as I said e'en now, I have long marvelled how thou hadst them and where."

"Fair sir," said Clement, "as for her drinking of the Well at the World's End, it is not so; but this is a good woman, and a valiant, and of great wisdom; and such women wear well, even as a well-wrought piece of armour that hath borne many strokes of the craftsman's hand, and hath in it some deal of his very mind and the wisdom of him. But now let her tell thee her tale (which forsooth I know not), for night is growing old."

CHAPTER 28

Dame Katherine Tells of the Pair of Beads, and Whence She Had Them

Katherine cast friendly looks on them and said: "Gossip, and thou, Clement, I will make a clean breast of it once for all. In the days when I was first wedded to Master Clement yonder, he found his bed cold without me, for he was a hot lover; therefore would he often have me with him on his journeys, how hard soever or perilous the way might be. Yea, Clement, thou lookest the sooth, though thou sayest it not, I was nought loth thereto, partly because I would not grieve thee, my man; but partly, and belike mostly, because I was wishful to see the ways of the world even at the risk of being thrust out of the world. So it befell us on a time to make a journey together, a journey exceeding long, in the company of certain chapmen, whereof some, and not a few, died on the way. But we lived, and came into the eastern parts of the earth to a city right ancient, and fulfilled of marvels, which hight Sarras the Holy. There saw we wonders whereof were it overlong to tell of here; but one while I will

tell thee, my lord. But this I must needs say, that I heard tell of a woman dwelling there, who was not old by seeming, but had in her the wisdom of ten lives, and the longing gat hold of me to see her and learn wisdom of her. So I entreated many who were called wise, some with prayers, and some with gifts also, to help me to speech of her; but I gat nothing either by praying or giving; they that would have helped me could not, and they that could would not. So, what between one thing and another, the longing to see the Wise Woman grew as it were into a madness in me. Amidst of which we fell in with a merchant exceeding wise in ancient lore, who looked at me (though Clement knew it not) with eyes of love. Of this man I asked concerning the Wise Woman, and he seeing my desire, strove to use it merchant-like, and would deal with me and have in payment for his learning a gift which I had nought to do to give. Howbeit madness and my desire for speech with the Wise Woman got the better of me, and I promised to give no less than he would, trusting to beguile him after I had got my desire, and be quit of him. So he led me to the woman and went his ways. She dwelt all by herself in a nook of an ancient ruined palace, erst the house of the ancientest of all the kings of Sarras. When I came to her, I saw nought dreadful or ugsome about her: she was cheerful of countenance and courteous of demeanour, and greeted me kindly as one neighbour in the street of Wulstead might do to another. I saw her, that she was by seeming a woman of some forty winters, trim and well-fashioned of body, nowise big, but slender, of dark red hair and brown eyes somewhat small.

"Now, she said to me, 'I have looked for thee a while; now thou art come, thou shalt tell me what thou needest, and thy needs will I fulfil. Yet needs must thou do a thing for me in return, and maybe thou wilt deem it a great thing. Yet whereas thou has struck a bargain before thou camest hither, if I undo that for thee, the bargain with me may be nought so burdensome. How sayest thou?'

"Well, I saw now that I was in the trap, for ill had it been in those days had Clement come to know that I had done amiss; for he was a jealous lover, and a violent man."

Clement smiled hereat, but said nought, and Katherine went on: "Trap or no trap, if I were eager before, I was over-eager now; so when she bade me swear to do her will, I swore it without tarrying.

"Then she said: 'Sit down before me, and I will teach thee wisdom.' What did she teach me? say ye. Well, if I told you belike ye would be none the wiser; but so much she told me, that my heart swelled with joy of the wisdom which I garnered. Say thou, Clement, if I have been the worser woman to thee, or thy friends, or mine."

"Nay, goodwife," said Clement, "I have nought against thee."

Katherine laughed and went on:

"At last the Wise Woman said, 'Now that thou hast of me all that may avail thee, comes the other part of our bargain, wherein I shall take and thou shalt give.'

"Quoth I, 'That is but fair, and thou shalt find me true to thee.' She said, 'If thou be not, I shall know it, and shall amend it in such wise that it shall cost thee much.'

"Then she looked on me long and keenly, and said afterward: 'Forsooth I should forbear laying this charge upon thee if I did not deem that thou wouldst be no less than true. But now I will try it, whereas I deem that the days of my life henceforward shall not be many; and many days would it take me to find a woman as little foolish as thee and as little false, and thereto as fairly fashioned.'

"Therewith she put her hand to her neck, and took thence the self-same pair of beads which I gave to thee, dear gossip, and which (praise be to All Hallows!) thou hast borne ever since; and she said: 'Now hearken! Thou shalt take this pair of beads, and do with them as I bid thee. Swear again thereto.' So I swore by All Angels; and she said again: 'This pair of beads shall one day lead a man unto the Well at the World's End, but no woman; forsooth, if a woman have them of a woman, or the like of them, (for there be others,) they may serve her for a token; but will be no talisman or leading-stone to her; and this I tell thee lest thou seek to the Well on the strength of them. For I bid thee give them to a man that thou lovest—that thou lovest well, when he is in

most need; only he shall not be of thine own blood. This is all that I lay upon thee; and if thou do it, thou shalt thrive, and if thou do it not, thou shalt come to harm. And I will tell thee now that this meeting betwixt us is not by chance-hap, but of my bringing about; for I have laboured to draw thee to me, knowing that thou alone of women would avail me herein. Now shalt thou go home to thine hostel, and take this for a token of my sooth-saying. The wise merchant who led thee unto me is abiding thine homecoming that he may have of thee that which thou promisedst to him. If then thou find him at thine hostel, and he take thee by the hand and lead thee to bed, whereas Clement is away till to-morrow even, then shalt thou call me a vain word-spinner and a liar; but if when thou comest home there, the folk there say to thee merchant Valerius is ridden away hastily, being called afar on a message of life and death, then shalt thou trow in me as a wise woman. Herewith depart, and I bid thee farewell.'

"So I went my ways to my hostel trembling, and at the door I met the chamberlain, who said to me, 'Lady, the merchant Valerius hath been here seeking thee, and he said that he would abide thy coming; but amidst of his abiding cometh a man who would speak to him privily; whereof it came that he called for his horse and bade me tell thee, Lady, that he was summoned on a matter of life and death, and would return to kiss thine hands in five days' space.'

"So I wotted that the woman had spoken sooth, and was wise and foreseeing, and something of a dread of her came upon me. But the next even back cometh Clement, and the day after we rode away from Sarras the Holy, and Valerius I saw never again. And as to the beads, there is nought to tell of them till they came into thine hands; and something tells me that it was the will of the Wise Woman that to no other hands they should come."

Here Katherine made an end, and both the men sat pondering her tale a little. As for Ralph, he deemed it certain that the Wise Woman of Sarras would be none other than she who had taught lore to the Lady of Abundance; but why she should have meant the beads for him he wotted not. Again he wondered how it was that the Lady of Abundance

should have given the beads to Ursula, and whether she knew that they had no might to lead her to the Well at the World's End. And yet further he wondered how it was that Ursula, unholpen by the talisman, should have done so much to bring him to the Well; yea, and how she was the first to see it while he slept. But his heart told him that whereas he was seeking the Well with her, she must needs come thither with him, unless they were both cast away; withal Katherine looked at him and said: "Yea, dear lord, I wot what thou art thinking of; but couldest thou have left her, when thou hadst once found her again, Well or no Well?" "Sooth is that," said Ralph, "yet for all that she hath done without help of talisman or witchcraft is she the more worshipful and the dearer."

Then speech came into Clement's mouth, and he said: "Wife, it is as I said before, when thy gossip had just departed from us. It was meet enough that thou shouldst have loved him better than me; but now it is even less to be undone than ever, when he has come back bringing with him a woman so valiant and lovely as is my Lady Ursula. So thou must e'en take the life that fate hath sent thee." Katherine laughed through her tears, and said: "Withal, goodman, I have been no bad wife to thee. And moreover, look thou, gossip dear: when I was wandering about with Clement amongst many perils, when our need seemed sorest, then would I think to give the beads to Clement; but so soon as I began to speak to him of the Well at the World's End he would belittle the tale of it, and would bid me look to it if it were not so, that where the world endeth the clouds begin."

As she spoke, Ralph lifted up his hand and pointed to the window, and said: "Friends, as we were speaking of all these marvels we were forgetting the need of Upmeads and the day of battle; and lo now! how the dawn is widening and the candles fading."

Scarce were the words out of his mouth, when on the quietness of the beginning of day brake out the sound of four trumpets, which were sounding in the four quarters of the town, and blowing men to the gathering. Then rose up both Ralph and Clement and took their weapons, and they kissed

Katherine and went soberly out-a-doors into the market-place, where already weaponed men were streaming in to the muster.

CHAPTER 29

They Go Down to Battle in Upmeads

Before it was light were all men come into the market-place, and Ralph and Richard and Clement and Stephen a-Hurst fell to and arrayed them duly; and now, what with the company which Ralph had led into Wulstead, what with the men of the town, and them that had fled from Upmeads (though these last were mostly old men and lads), they were a thousand and four score and three. Ralph would go afoot as he went yesterday; but today he bore in his hand the ancient staff of war, the gold-written guisarme; and he went amongst the Shepherds, with whom were joined the feeble folk of Upmeads, men whom he had known of old and who knew him, and it was as if their hearts had caught fire from his high heart, and that whatever their past days had been to them, this day at least should be glorious. Withal anon comes Ursula from St. Austin's with the Sage of Swevenham, whose face was full smiling and cheerful. Ursula wore that day a hauberk under her gown, and was helmed with a sallet; and because of her armour she rode upon a little horse. Ralph gave her into the warding of the Sage, who was armed at all points, and looked a valiant man of war. But Ralph's brother, Hugh, had gotten him a horse, and had fallen into the company of the Champions, saying that he deemed they would go further forth than a sort of sheep-tending churls and the runaways of Upmeads.

As for Ralph, he walked up and down the ranks of the stout men of the Down-country, and saw how they had but

little armour for defence, though their weapons for cutting and thrusting looked fell and handy. So presently he turned about to Giles, who, as aforesaid, bore a long hauberk, and said: "Friend, the walk we are on to-day is a long one for carrying burdens, and an hour after sunrise it will be hot. Wilt thou not do with thy raiment as I do?" And therewith he did off his hauberk and his other armour save his sallet. "This is good," said he, "for the sun to shine on, so that I may be seen from far; but these other matters are good for folk who fight a-horseback or on a wall; we striders have no need of them."

Then arose great shouting from the Shepherds, and men stretched out the hand to him and called hail on his valiant heart.

Amidst of which cries Giles muttered, but so as Ralph might hear him: "It is all down hill to Upmeads; I shall take off my iron-coat coming back again." So Ralph clapped him on the shoulder and bade him come back whole and well in any case. "Yea, and so shalt thou come back," said he.

Then the horns blew for departure, and they went their ways out of the market-place, and out into the fields through the new wooden wall of Wulstead. Richard led the way with a half score of the Champions, but he rode but a little way before Ralph, who marched at the head of the Shepherds.

So they went in the fresh morning over the old familiar fields, and strange it seemed to Ralph that he was leading an host into the little land of Upmeads. Speedily they went, though in good order, and it was but a little after sunrise when they were wending toward the brow of the little hill whence they would look down into the fair meads whose image Ralph had seen on so many days of peril and weariness.

And now Richard and his fore-riders had come up on to the brow and sat there on their horses clear against the sky; and Ralph saw how Richard drew his sword from the scabbard and waved it over his head, and he and his men shouted; then the whole host set up a great shout, and hastened up the bent, but with the end of their shout and the sound of the tramp of their feet and the rattle of their war-gear was mingled a confused noise of cries a way off,

and the blowing of horns, and as Ralph and his company came crowding up on to the brow, he looked down and saw the happy meadows black with weaponed men, and armour gleaming in the clear morning, and the points of weapons casting back the low sun's rays and glittering like the sparks in a dying fire of straw. Then again he looked, and lo! the High House rising over the meadows unburned and unhurt, and the banner of the fruited tree hanging forth from the topmost tower thereof.

Then he felt a hand come on to his cheek, and lo, Ursula beside him, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glittering; and she cried out: "O thine home, my beloved, thine home!" And he turned to her and said; "Yea, presently, sweetheart!" "Ah," she said, "will it be long? and they so many!" "And we so mighty!" said Ralph. "Nay, it will be but a little while. Wise man of Swevenham, see to it that my beloved is anigh me to-day, for where I am, there will be safety."

The Sage nodded yeasay and smiled.

Then Ralph looked along the ridge to right and left of him, and saw that all the host had come up and had a sight of the foemen; on the right stood the Shepherds staring down into the meadow and laughing for the joy of battle and the rage of the oppressed. On the left sat the Champions of the Dry Tree on their horses, and they also were tossing up their weapons and roaring like lions for the prey; and down below the black crowd had drawn together into ordered ranks, and still the clamour and rude roaring of the warriors arose thence, and beat against the hill's brow.

Now so fierce and ready were the men of Ralph's company that it was a near thing but that they, and the Shepherds in especial, did not rush tumultuously down the hill all breathless and in ill order. But Ralph cried out to Richard to go left, and Giles to go right, and stay the onset for a while; and to bid the leaders come to him where he stood. Then the tumult amidst his folk lulled, and Stephen a-Hurst and Roger and three others of the Dry Tree came to him, and Giles brought three of the Shepherds, and there was Clement and a fellow of his. So when they were come and standing in a ring round Ralph, he said to them:

"Brothers in arms, ye see that our foes are all in array to meet us, having had belike some spy in Wulstead, who hath brought them the tale of what was toward. Albeit methinks that this irks not either you nor me; for otherwise we might have found them straggling, and scattered far and wide, which would have made our labour the greater. Now ye can see with your eyes that they are many more than we be, even were Nicholas to issue out of the High House against them, as doubtless he will do if need be. Brethren, though they be so many, yet my heart tells me that we shall overcome them; yet if we leave our strength and come down to them, both our toil shall be greater, and some of us, belike many, shall be slain; and evil should I deem it if but a score of my friends should lose their lives on this joyous day when at last I see Upmeads again after many troubles. Wherefore my rede is that we abide their onset on the hillside here; and needs must they fall on us, whereas we have Wulstead and friends behind us, and they nought but Nicholas and the bows and bills of the High House. But if any have aught to say against it let him speak, but be speedy; for already I see a stir in their array, and I deem that they will send men to challenge us to come down to them."

Then spake Stephen a-Hurst: "I, and we all meseemeth, deem that thou art in the right, Captain; though sooth to say, when we first set eyes on these dogs again, the blood so stirred in us that we were like to let all go and ride down on them."

Said Richard: "Thou biddest us wisdom of war; let them have the hill against them." Said Clement: "Yea, for they are well learned and well armed; another sort of folk to those wild men whom we otherthrew in the mountains."

And in like wise said they all.

Then spake Stephen again: "Lord, since thou wilt fight afoot with our friends of the Shepherds, we of the Dry Tree are minded to fare in like wise and to forego our horses; but if thou gainsay it——"

"Champion," said Ralph, "I do gainsay it. Thou seest how many of them be horsed, and withal ye it is who must hold

the chase of them; for I will that no man of them shall escape."

They laughed joyously at his word, and then he said: "Go now, and give your leaders of scores and tens the word that I have said, and come back speedily for a little while; for now I see three men sundering them from their battle, and one beareth a white cloth at the end of his spear; these shall be the challengers."

So they did after his bidding, and by then they had come back to Ralph those three men were at the foot of the hill, which was but low. Then Ralph said to his captains: "Stand before me, so that I be not seen of them until one of you hath made answer, 'Speak of this to our leader and captain.' " Even so they did; and presently those three came so nigh that they could see the whites of their eyes. They were all three well armed, but the foremost of them was clad in white steel from head to foot, so that he looked like a steel image, all but his face, which was pale and sallow and grim. He and his two fellows, when they were right nigh, rode slowly all along the front of Ralph's battles thrice, and none spake aught to them, and they gave no word to any; but when they came over against the captains who stood before Ralph for the fourth time, they reined up and faced them, and the leader put back his sallet and spake in a great and rough voice:

"Ye men! we have heard these three hours that ye were coming, wherefore we have drawn out into the meads which we have taken, that ye might see how many and how valiant we be, and might fear us. Wherefore now, ye broken reivers of the Dry Tree, ye silly shepherds of silly sheep, ye weavers and apprentices of Wulstead, and if there by any more, ye fools! we give you two choices this morn. Either come down to us into the meadow yonder, that we may slay you with less labour, or else, which will be the better for you, give up to us the Upmeads thralls who be with you, and then turn your faces and go back to your houses, and abide there till we come and pull you out of them, which may be some while yet. Hah! what say ye, fools?"

Then spake Clement and said: "Ye messengers of the

robbers and oppressors, why make ye this roaring to the common people and the sergeants? Why speak ye not with our Captain?"

Cried out the challenger, "Where then is the Captain of the Fools? is he hidden? can he hear my word?"

Scare was it out of his mouth ere the captains fell away to right and left, and there, standing by himself, was Ralph, holding the ancient lettered war-staff; his head was bare, for now he had done off his sallet, and the sun and the wind played in his bright hair; glorious was his face, and his grey eyes gleamed with wrath and mastery as he spake in a clear voice, and there was silence all along the ranks to hearken him:

"O messenger of the robbers! I am the captain of this folk. I see that the voice hath died away within the jaws of you; but it matters not, for I have heard thy windy talk, and this is the answer: we will neither depart, nor come down to you, but will abide our death by you hands here on this hill-side. Go with this answer."

The man stared wild at Ralph while he was speaking, and seemed to stagger in his saddle; then he let his sallet fall over his face, and, turning his horse about, rode swiftly, he and his two fellows, down the hill and away to the battle of the Burgers. None followed or cried after him; for now had a great longing and expectation fallen upon Ralph's folk, and they abode what shall befall with little noise. They noted so soon as the messenger was gotten to the main of the foemen that there was a stir amongst them, and they were ordering their ranks to move against the hill. And withal they saw men all armed coming from out the High House, who went down to the Bridge and abode there. Upmeads-water ran through the meadows betwixt the hill and the High House, as hath been said afore; but as it winded along, one reach of it went nigh to the House, and made wellnigh a quarter of a circle about it before it turned to run down the meadows to the eastward; and at this nighest point was there a wide bridge well builded of stone.

The Burg-devils heeded not the men at the Bridge, but, being all arrayed, made but short tarrying (and that belike

only to hear the tale of their messenger) ere they came in two battles straight across the meadow. They on their right were all riders, and these faced the Champions of the Dry Tree, but a great battle of footmen came against the Shepherds and the rest of Ralph's footmen, but in their rearward was a company of well-horsed men-at-arms; and all of them were well armed and went right orderly and warrior-like.

It was but some fifteen minutes ere they were come to the foot of the hill, and they fell to mounting it with laughter and mockery, but Ralph's men held their peace. The horsemen were somewhat speedier than those on foot, though they rode but at a foot's pace, and when they were about halfway up the hill and were faltering a little (for it was somewhat steep, though nought high), the Champions of the Dry Tree could forbear them no longer, but set up a huge roar, and rode at them, so that they all went down the hill together, but the Champions were lost amidst of the huge mass of the foemen.

But Ralph was left at the very left end of his folk, and the foemen came up the hill speedily with much noise and many foul mocks as aforesaid, and they were many and many more than Ralph's folk, and now that the Champions were gone, could have enfolded them at either end; but no man of the company blenched or faltered, only here and there one spake soft to his neighbour, and here and there one laughed the battle-laugh.

Now at the hanging of the hill, whenas either side could see the whites of the foemen's eyes, the robbers stayed a little to gather breath; and in that nick of time Ralph strode forth into the midst between the two lines and up on to a little mound on the hill-side (which well he knew), and he lifted up the ancient guisarme, and cried on high: "Home now! Home to Upmeads!"

Then befell a marvel, for even, as all eyes of the foemen were turned on him, straightway their shouts and jeering and laughter fell dead, and then gave place to shrieks and wailing, as all they who beheld him cast down their weapons and fled wildly down the hill, overturning whatever stood in their way, till the whole mass of them was broken to pieces,

and the hill was covered with nought but cravens and the light-footed Shepherds slaughtering them in the chase.

But Ralph called Clement to him and they drew a stalworth band together, and, heeding nought the chase of the runaways, they fell on those who had the Champions in their midst, and fell to smiting down men on either hand; and every man who looked on Ralph crouched and cowered before him, casting down his weapons and throwing up his hands. Shortly to say it, when these horsemen felt this new onset, and looking round saw their men fleeing hither and thither over the green fields of Upmeads, smitten by the Shepherds and leaping into the deep pools of the river, they turned and fled, every man who could keep his saddle, and made for the Bridge, the Dry Tree thundering at their backs. But even as they came within bowshot, a great flight of arrows came from the further side of the water, and the banner of the Fruitful Tree came forth from the bridge-end with Nicholas and his tried men-at-arms behind it; and then indeed great and grim was the murder, and the proud men of the Burg grovelled on the ground and prayed for mercy till neither the Champions nor the men of Nicholas could smite helpless men any longer.

Now had Ralph held his hand from the chase, and he was sitting on a mound amidst of the meadow under an ancient thorn, and beside him sat the Sage of Swevenham and Ursula. And she was grown pale now and looked somewhat scared, and she spake in a trembling voice to Ralph, and said: "Alas friend! that this should be so grim! When we hear the owls a-nighttime about the High House, shall we not deem at whiles that it is the ghosts of this dreadful battle and slaughter wandering about our fair fields?" But Ralph spake sternly and wrathfully as he sat there bareheaded and all unarmed save for the ancient glaive: "Why did they not slay me then? Better the ghosts of robbers in our fields by night, than the over-burdened hapless thrall by day, and the scourged woman, and ruined child. These things they sought for us and have found death on the way—let it be!"

He laughed as he spake; but then the grief of the end of battle came upon him and he trembled and shook, and great

tears burst from his eyes and rolled down his cheeks, and he became stark and hard-faced.

Then Ursula took his hands and caressed them, and kissed his face, and fell a-talking to him of how they rode the pass to the Valley of Sweet Chestnuts; and in a while his heart and his mind came back to him as it did that other time of which she spake, and he kissed her in turn, and began to tell her of his old chamber in the turret of the High House.

And now there come riding across the field two warriors. They draw rein by the mound, and one lights down, and lo! it is Long Nicholas; and he took Ralph in his arms, and kissed him and wept over him for all his grizzled beard and his gaunt limbs; but few words he had for him, save this: "My little Lord, was it thou that was the wise captain to-day, or this stout lifter and reiver?" But the other man was Stephen a-Hurst, who laughed and said: "Nay, Nicholas, I was the fool, and this stripling the wise warrior. But, Lord Ralph, thou wilt pardon me, I hope, but we could not kill them all, for they would not fight in any wise; what shall we do with them?" Ralph knit his brows and thought a little; then he said: "How many hast thou taken?" Said Stephen: "Some two hundred alive." "Well," quoth Ralph; "strip them of all armour and weapons, and let a score of thy riders drive them back the way they came into the Debateable Wood. But give them this last word from me, that or long I shall clear the said wood of all strong-thieves."

Stephen departed on that errand; and presently comes Giles and another of the Shepherds with a like tale, and had a like answer.

Now amidst all these deeds it yet lacked an hour of noon. So presently Ralph arose and took Richard apart for a while and spoke with him a little, and then came back to Ursula and took her by the hand, and said: "Beloved, Richard shall take thee now to a pleasant abode this side the water; for I grudge that thou shouldst enter the High House without me; and as for me I must needs ride back to Wulstead to bring hither my father and mother, as I promised to do after the battle. In good sooth, I deemed it would have lasted longer." Said Ursula: "Dear friend, this is even what I should have

bidden thee myself. Depart speedily, that thou mayst be back the sooner; for sorely do I long to enter thine house, beloved." Then Ralph turned to Nicholas, and said: "Our host is not so great but that thou mayst victual it well; yet I deem it is little less than when we left Wulstead early this morning."

"True is that, little lord," said Nicholas. "Hear a wonder amongst battles: of thy Shepherds and the other footmen is not one slain, and but some five hurt. The Champions have lost three men slain outright, and some fifteen hurt; of whom is thy brother Hugh, but not sorely." "Better than well is thy story then," said Ralph. "Now let them bring me a horse." So when he was horsed, he kissed Ursula and went his ways. And she abode his coming back at Richard's house anigh the water.

CHAPTER 30

Ralph Brings His Father and Mother to Upmeads

Short was the road back again to Wulstead, and whereas the day was not very old when Ralph came there, he failed not to stop at Clement's house, and came into the chamber where sat Dame Katherine in pensive wise nigh to the window, with her open hands in her lap. Quoth Ralph: "Rejoice, gossip! for neither is Clement hurt, nor I, and all is done that should be done." She moved her but little, but the tears came into her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. "What, gossip?" quoth Ralph; "these be scarce tears of joy; what aileth thee?" "Nay," said Katherine, "indeed I am joyful of thy tidings, though sooth to say I looked for none other. But, dear lord and gossip, forgive me my tears on the day of thy triumph; for if they be not wholly of joy, so also are they not wholly of sorrow. But love and the passing of the days are bitter-

sweet within my heart to-day. Later on thou shalt see few faces more cheerful and merry in the hall at Upmeads than this of thy gossip's. So be merry now, and go fetch thy father and thy mother, and rejoice their hearts that thou hast been even better than thy word to them. Farewell, gossip; but look to see me at Upmeads before many days are past; for I know thee what thou art; and that the days will presently find deeds for thee, and thou wilt be riding into peril, and coming safe from out of it. Farewell!"

So he departed and rode to the House of St. Austin, and the folk gathered so about him in the street that at the gate of the Priory he had to turn about and speak to them; and he said: "Good people, rejoice! there are no more foemen of Wulstead anigh you now; and take this word of me, that I will see to it in time to come that ye live in peace and quiet here."

Folk shouted for joy, and the fathers who were standing within the gate heard his word and rejoiced, and some of them ran off to tell King Peter that his son was come back victorious already; so that by then he had dismounted at the Guest-house door, lo! there was the King and his wife with him, and both they alboun for departure. And when they saw him King Peter cried out: "There is no need to say a word, my son; unless thou wouldst tell the tale to the holy father Prior, who, as ye see, has e'en now come out to us."

Said Ralph: "Father and mother, I pray your blessing, and also the blessing of the father Prior here; and the tale is short enough: that we have overthrown them and slain the more part, and the others are now being driven like a herd of swine into their stronghold of the Wood Debateable, where, forsooth, I shall be ere the world is one month older. And in the doing of all this have but three of our men been slain and a few hurt, amongst whom is thy son Hugh, but not sorely."

"O yea, son," said his mother, "he shall do well enough. But now with thy leave, holy Prior, we will depart, so that we may sleep in the High House to-night, and feel that my dear son's hand is over us to ward us."

Then Ralph knelt before them, and King Peter and his wife blessed their son when they had kissed and embraced

each other, and they wept for joy of him. The Prior also, who was old, and a worthy prelate, and an ancient friend of King Peter, might not refrain his tears at the joy of his friends as he gave Ralph his blessing. And then, when Ralph had risen up and the horses were come, he said to him: "One thing thou art not to forget, young conqueror, to wit, that thou art to come here early one day, and tell me all thy tale at full length."

"Yea, Prior," said Ralph, "or there is the High House of Upmeads for thee to use as thine own, and a rest for thee of three or four days while thou hearkenest the tale; for it may need that."

"Hearken," said King Peter softly to the Dame, "how he reckons it all his own; my day is done, my dear." He spake smiling, and she said: "Soothly he is waxen masterful, and well it becometh the dear youngling."

Now they get to horse and ride their ways, while all folk blessed them. The two old folk rode fast and pressed their nags whatever Ralph might do to give them pastime of words; so they came into the plain field of Upmeads two hours before sunset; and King Peter said: "Now I account it that I have had one day more of my life than was my due, and thou, son, hast added it to the others whereas thou didst not promise to bring me hither till morrow."

Ralph led them round by the ford, so that they might not come across the corpses of the robbers; but already were the Upmeads carles at work digging trenches wherein to bury them.

So Ralph led his father and his mother to the gate of the garth of High House; then he got off his horse and helped them down, and as he so dealt with his father, he said to him: "Thou art springy and limber yet, father; maybe thou wilt put on thine helm this year to ride the Debateable Wood with me."

The old man laughed and said: "Maybe, son; but as now it is time for thee to enter under our roof-tree once more."

"Nay," said Ralph, "but go ye in and sit in the high-seat and abide me. For did I not go straight back to you from the field of battle; and can I suffer it that any other hand than

mine should lead my wife into the hall and up to the high-seat of my fathers; and therefore I go to fetch her from the house of Richard the Red where she is abiding me; but presently I shall lead her in, and do ye then with us what ye will."

Therewith he turned about and rode his ways to Richard's house, which was but a half-mile thence. But his father and mother laughed when he was gone, and King Peter said: "There again! thou seest, wife, it is he that commands and we that obey."

"O happy hour that so it is!" said the Lady, "and happy now shall be the wearing of our days."

So they entered the garth and came into the house, and were welcomed with all joy by Nicholas, and told him all that Ralph had said, and bade him array the house as he best might; for there was much folk about the High House, though the Upmeads carles and queans had taken the more part of the host to their houses, which they had delivered from the fire and sword, and they made much of them there with a good heart.

CHAPTER 31

Ralph Brings Ursula Home to the High House

Ralph speedily came to Richard's house and entered the chamber, and found Ursula alone therein, clad in the daintiest of her woman's gear of the web of Goldburg. She rose up to meet him, and he took her in his arms, and said: "Now is come the very ending of our journey that we so often longed for; and all will be ready by then we come to the High House."

"Ah," she said, as she clung to him, "but they were happy

days the days of our journey; and to-morrow begins a new life."

"Nay," he said, "but rather this even; shall it be loathly to thee, lady?"

She said: "There will be many people whom I knew not yesterday." "There will be but me," he said, "when the night hath been dark for a little."

She kissed him and said nought. And therewithal came some of Richard's folk, for it was his house, and led with them a white palfrey for Ursula's riding, dight all gay and goodly.

"Come then," said Ralph, "thou needest not to fear the ancient house, for it is kind and lovely, and my father and my mother thou hast seen already, and they love thee. Come then, lest the hall be grown too dusk for men to see thy fairness." "Yea, yea," she said, "but first here is a garland I made for thee, and one also for me, while I was abiding thee after the battle, and my love and my hope is woven into it. And she set it on his head, and said, "O thou art fair, and I did well to meet thee in the dark wood." Then he kissed her dearly on the mouth and led her forth, and none went with them, and they mounted and went their ways.

But Ralph said: "I deem that we should ride the meadow to the bridge, because that way lies the great door of the hall, and if I know my father and Nicholas they will look for us that way. Dost thou yet fear these dead men, sweetheart, whom our folk slew this morning?" "Nay," she said, "it has been a long time since the morning, and they, and their fierieness which has so burned out, are now to me as a tale that hath been told. It is the living that I am going to, and I hope to do well by them."

Came they then to the bridge-end and there was no man there, nought but the kine that were wandering about over the dewy grass of eventide. Then they rode over the bridge and through the orchard, and still there was no man, and all gates were open wide. So they came into the base-court of the house, and it also was empty of folk; and they came to the great doors of the hall and they were open wide, and they could see through them that the hall was full of folk,

and therein by the light of the low sun that streamed in at the shot-window at the other end they saw the faces of men and the gleam of steel and gold.

So they lighted down from their horses, and took hand in hand and entered bright-faced and calm, and goodly beyond the goodliness of men; then indeed all that folk burst forth into glad cries, and tossed up their weapons, and many wept for joy.

As they went slowly up the long hall (and it was thirty fathom of length) Ralph looked cheerfully and friendly from side to side, and beheld the faces of the Shepherds and the Champions, and the men of Wulstead, and his own folk; and all they cried hail to him and the lovely and valiant Lady. Then he looked up to the high-seat, and saw that his father's throne was empty, and his mother's also; but behind the throne stood a knight all armed in bright armour holding the banner of Upmeads; but his father and mother stood on the edge of the daïs to meet him and Ursula; and when they came up thither these old folk embraced them and kissed them and led them up to the table. Then Ralph bade Ursula sit by his mother, and made him ready to sit by his father in all love and duty. But King Peter stayed him and said: "Nay, dear son, not there, but here shalt thou sit, thou saviour of Upmeads and conqueror of the hearts of men; this is a little land, but therein shall be none above thee." And therewith he set Ralph down in the throne, and Ralph, turning to his left hand, saw that it was Ursula, and not his mother, who sat beside him. But at the sight of these two in the throne the glad cries and shouts shook the very timbers of the roof, and the sun sank under while yet they cried hail to the King of Upmeads.

Then were the lights brought and the supper, and all men fell to feast, and plenteous was the wine in the hall; and sure since first men met to eat together none have been merrier than they.

But now when men had well eaten, and the great cup called the River of Upmeads was brought in, the cupbearers, being so bidden before, brought it last of all to King Peter, and he stood up with the River in his hand and spoke aloud,

and said: "Lords and warriors, and good people all, here I do you to wit, that it is not because my son Ralph has come home to-day and wrought us a great deliverance, and that my love hath overcome me; it is not for this cause that I have set him in my throne this even; but because I see and perceive that of all the kindred he is meetest to sit therein so long as he liveth; unless perchance this lovely and valiant woman should bear him a son even better than himself—and so may it be. Therefore I do you all to wit that this man is the King of Upmeads, and this woman is his Lady and Queen; and so deem I of his prowess, and his wisdom, and kindliness, that I trow he shall be lord and servant of other lands than Upmeads, and shall draw the good towns and the kindreds and worthy good lords into peace and might and well-being, such as they have not known heretofore. Now within three days shall mass be sung in the choir of St. Laurence, and then shall King Ralph swear on the gospels such oaths as ye wot of, to guard his people, and help the needy, and oppress no man, even as I have sworn it. And I say to you, that if I have kept the oath to my power, yet shall he keep it better, as he is mightier than I.

"Furthermore, when he hath sworn, then shall the vassals swear to him according to ancient custom, to be true to him and hardy in all due service. But so please you I will not abide till then, but will kneel to him and to his Lady and Queen here and now."

Even so he did, and took Ralph's hand in his and swore service to him such as was due; and he knelt to Ursula also, and bade her all thanks for what she had done in the helping of his son; and they raised him up and made much of him and of Ralph's mother; and great was the joy of all folk in the hall.

So the feast went on a while till the night grew old, and folk must fare bedward. Then King Peter and his wife brought Ralph and Ursula to the chamber of the solar, the kingly chamber, which was well and goodly dight with hangings and a fair and glorious bed, and was newly decked with such fair flowers as the summer might furnish; and at the threshold King Peter stayed them and said: "Kinsman, and

thou, dear friend, this is become your due chamber and resting-place while ye live in the world, and this night of all others it shall be a chamber of love; for ye are, as it were, new wedded, since now first ye are come amongst the kindred as lover and beloved; and thou, Ursula, art now at last the bride of this ancient house; now tell me, doth it not look friendly and kindly on thee?"

"O yea, yea," she said. "Come thou, my man and my darling and let us be alone in the master-chamber of this ancient House."

Then Ralph drew her unto him; and the old man blessed them and prayed for goodly offspring for them, that the House of Upmeads might long endure.

And thus were they two left alone amidst the love and hope of the kindred, as erst they lay alone in the desert.

CHAPTER 32

Yet a Few Words Concerning Ralph of Upmeads

Certain it is that Ralph failed not of his promise to the good Prior of St. Austin's at Wulstead, but went to see him speedily, and told him all the tale of his wanderings as closely as he might, and hid naught from him; which, as ye may wot, was more than one day's work or two or three. And ever when Ralph thus spoke was a brother of the House sitting with the Prior, which brother was a learned and wise man and very speedy and deft with his pen. Wherefore it has been deemed not unlike that from this monk's writing has come the more part of the tale above told. And if it be so, it is well.

Furthermore, it is told of Ralph of Upmeads that he ruled over his lands in right and might, and suffered no oppression within them, and delivered other lands and good towns when

they fell under tyrants and oppressors; and for as kind a man as he was in hall and at hearth, in the field he was a warrior so wise and dreadful, that oft forsooth the very sound of his name and rumour of his coming stayed the march of hosts and the ravage of fair lands; and no lord was ever more beloved. Till his deathday he held the Castle of the Scaur, and cleansed the Wood Perilous of all strong-thieves and reivers, so that no high-street of a good town was safer than its glades and its byways. The new folk of the Burg of the Four Friths made him their lord and captain, and the Champions of the Dry Tree obeyed him in all honour so long as any of them lasted. He rode to Higham and offered himself as captain to the abbot thereof, and drave out the tyrants and oppressors thence, and gave back peace to the Frank of Higham. Ever was he true captain and brother to the Shepherd-folk, and in many battles they followed him; and were there any scarcity or ill hap amongst them, he helped them to the uttermost of his power. The Wood Debateable also he cleared of foul robbers and reivers, and rooted out the last of the Burg-devils, and delivered three good towns beyond the wood from the cruelty of the oppressor.

Once in every year he and Ursula his wife visited the Land of Abundance, and he went into the castle there as into a holy place, and worshipped the memory of the Lady whom he had loved so dearly. With all the friends of his quest he was kind and well-beloved.

In about two years from the day when he rode home, came to him the Lord Bull of Utterbol with a chosen band, of whom were both Otter and Redhead. That very day they came he was about putting his foot in the stirrup to ride against the foemen; so Bull and his men would not go into the High House to eat, but drank a cup where they stood, and turned and rode with him straightway, and did him right manly service in battle; and went back with him afterwards to Upmeads, and abode with him there in feasting and joyance for two months' wearing. And thrice in the years that followed, when his lands at home seemed safest and most at peace, Ralph took a chosen band, and Ursula with them, and Clement withal, and journeyed through the wastes

and the mountains to Utterbol, and passed joyous days with his old thrall of war, Bull Nosy, now become a very mighty man and the warder of the peace of the Uttermost lands.

Clement and Katherine came oft to the High House, and Katherine exceeding often; and she loved and cherished Ursula and lived long in health of body and peace of mind.

All the days that Ralph of Upmeads lived, he was the goodliest of men, and no man to look on him had known it when he grew old; and when he changed his life, an exceeding ancient man, he was to all men's eyes in the very blossom of his age.

As to Ursula his wife, she was ever as valiant and true as when they met in the dark night amidst of the Eastland wood. Eight goodly children she bore him, and saw four generations of her kindred wax up; but even as it was with Ralph, never was she less goodly of body, nay rather, but fairer than when first she came to Upmeads; and the day whereon any man saw her was a day of joyful feast to him, a day to be remembered for ever. On one day they two died and were laid together in one tomb in the choir of St. Laurence of Upmeads. AND HERE ENDS THE TALE OF THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END.

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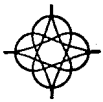

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